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Religion in museums: Euthanized sacredness, in the beholder’s eye, or a multi-tool for shifting needs? Three suggested models to discuss how museums affect sacredness.

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What happens when religion in the shape of objects imbued with religious meaning is transformed into cultural heritage? The relation between religion and museums has been the topic for a number of recent publications from different parts of the world and focusing different religious traditions.1 Drawing from my ongoing PhD project in museology at Umeå university2, I suggest three models to understand and discuss the processes of heritagisation of religion and the factors involved.

Religion as heritage, religion in museums – and religious museums

To examine how museums and heritage identity affect religion, let us start by looking at the concepts. Heritage can be in a museum, and a museum can be part of a heritage, but they don’t have to be; ‘heritage’ might be the zone where the museum world and the visitor world intersect.3 Museums are undergoing major changes in terms of uses of various new media including the internet, and new expectations to be active parts in contemporary debates and to address issues at stake in our time, while simultaneously maintaining their more traditional role as knowledge producers and materialisers of culture.4 The museum in this sense is a multi-layered and complex concept far from the traditional temple for the cult of history.5 The traditional object-centred way of displaying in museums, where the object is supposed more or less to speak for itself, can even be likened to a monstrance, the often elaborated framing of a consecrated hostia being displayed to the faithful in Catholic rite.6 Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states that heritage is created through detachment, the creation of fragments, a process of exhibition, and with an agency of display.7 An aspect of

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2 Lighting candles before a headless Jesus. Enchanted heritage, disenchanted sacredness, and the journey inbetween. See also https://umu.academia.edu/HelenaWangefeltStröm
5 Davis, Desvallées & Mairesse, François (red.) (2010). What is a museum? Uses of heritage
6 Mairesse, François (2014). Le culte des musées. 53
heritagisation is its “rendering defunct” function, and how this necessarily presupposes
death and oblivion.

All kinds of efforts at preservation, all reworking of history and all kinds of revival presuppose and
are based on evanescence and death. To remember is a prelude to forgetting; in the case of the
cultural heritage industry, it is not memory but oblivion which lies at its core, because it is out of
forgotten and dead things that cultural heritage is fashioned [...]. Cultural heritage and museums
 evoke the idea of the living because they require and base their work on the left over, the
discarded and the defunct. 8

‘Heritagisation’ transforms its objects by turning them into exhibits. It is a political process
that establishes power over the past, the present and future. 9

‘Musealisation’ refers to the process when something is transferred from the sphere where
it was created and functioned, to the museum (Macdonald emphasises that ‘alive’ is a
keyword in contemporary museum promotional literature; this in contrast to heritagisation
as an act connected to death). 10

Religion is displayed in most different kinds of museums. Rita Capurro defines them:
Religious museum. Museum with particular reference to religion, including ecclesiastical
museums, or those which through collections, mission, choice of narrative, refer to religion.
Museum of religions. Museum aiming at presenting various religions of the world.
Museum for sacred art. Occupied mostly with collections of sacred art, or with objects
referring to a cult.

Ecclesiastical museum. Museum directed and owned by an ecclesiastical entity, with
collections that can span from sacred art to scientific collections.

Confessional museum. Institution expressing a group or a religious confession. Auto-
representative narratives mirroring the ideals and ideologies of the current confessions. 11

However, users of religious objects in museums sometimes tend to move between and
across the designated categories by praying or sacrificing flowers before a religious image in
an art museum: a kind of visitors’ rebellion against normative categorising? 12

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9 Ronström (2008). 182
11 Capurro (2013). 20-21
12 Paine, Crispin (2013) Religious objects in museums: private lives and public duties. 25-36, and in particular on worship in
museums 37-44
Religious, spiritual, holy, or sacred?

In the interface between heritage and religion in different fields, the terminology is all but homogenous. The formulations used in UNESCO’s *Initiative on Heritage of Religious Interest* display a somewhat ambiguous use of the terms ‘religious’, ‘spiritual’, and ‘sacred’:

The term "Religious property", as used in the ICOMOS study *Filling the Gaps - an Action Plan for the Future*, defines "any form of property with religious or spiritual associations: churches, monasteries, shrines, sanctuaries, mosques, synagogues, temples, sacred landscapes, sacred groves, and other landscape features, etc.".

The term "Sacred site" embraces areas of special spiritual significance to peoples and communities; and the term of "Sacred natural site" corresponds to the areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities, as proposed by the *UNESCO/IUCN Guidelines for the Conservation and Management of Sacred Natural Sites* (2008).

According to ICCROM, living religious heritage has characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of heritage. [...] Collectively, the religious and sacred properties capture a range of cultural and natural diversity, and each can singularly demonstrate the spirit of a particular place.\(^{13}\)

Here, “religious” appears to be connected primarily to constructed sites, if landscapes are also included, while “sacred” is related to nature and natural sites. Sacred sites are also characterized by being protected since ancient times. Religious and spiritual are both used to indicate a cultural and traditional connection to the divine, but in many cases – as in the previous quote – the latter is used to define something outside of the institutionalized and organized beliefs. As Crispin Paine describes the preconditions for his first book on religion in museums, *Godly Things*:\(^{14}\)

> Formal religion [my emphasis] was fast declining in much of Western Europe (though spirituality [my emphasis] wasn’t), but in much of the rest of the world religion was becoming ever more powerful and so more political.\(^{15}\)

Sacred indicates, according to historian Alphonse Dupront, not just a definition but also a method to categorise items and phenomena in the religious sphere. Sacredness is the almost physical presence of God in human bodies, actions, and divine – human interactions.\(^{16}\)

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\(^{15}\) Paine (2013). xiii

Some places, objects, relics and saints can also be considered holy: this indicates that the divine qualities are inherent and given by divine power – contrary to the sacred, which is an identity created within a religious context, but by means of human decisions.

Religion and sacredness in museums: Three suggested models to discuss how museums affect sacredness.

Model 1: Euthanized sacredness

A frequently used scholarly model depicts the museum as a killing of previous identities, and the objects as provided with entirely new identities, and lives, as museum objects. This view brings on effects for sacred objects, how they are handled and narrated in the museum, and possibly on how they are viewed by the visitors. The use - or not - of information signs before sacred objects in museums is an aspect on this matter. The musealisation effects on sacred matter can in this model be described as such:

From...  
• integrated part of a whole  
• touching  
• kissing  
• sensuality  
• interaction  
• dialogue with the sacred  
• reinforcement of religious narratives and values

To...  
• detached fragment  
• no touching  
• respectful distance  
• material preservation  
• information  
• cultural and historical admiration  
• reinforcement of historic and artistic values

This model in practice gives the museum curator freedom to re-contextualise the sacred and/or religious objects within a framework of, for example, art, history, decoration, crafts, or contemporary art. Since the objects are detached fragments, the possible sentiments of a religious beholder do not pose a problem.

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Model 2: In the beholder’s eye
The second model is the hybrid identity, where a museum object can be said to possess two authentic identities simultaneously, depending on the views and beliefs of the beholder: authentic sacredness, or authentic art object and evidence of history. This view may fit well with the focus on the individual in our time. It does not force the museum to take a stand regarding any true identity of the object – however, it does require an informed policy for managing and displaying the objects in a way that is not offensive to the believer.

Model 3: A multi-tool for shifting needs
The third model presented is based on the two previous ones, defined by shifting uses. The objects are allowed to be alive and dead (in the sense used above): a kind of Museum “Zombies”. Musealised objects can, as in the cases of religious treasuries or of certain religious objects or images in museums, shift identity between museum object, object of devotion (to be carried in processions or used in rituals), legitimization symbol (bishops’ ordinations etc), and, historically, as a monetary reserve to be sold if needed. These multiple identities attached to the sacred is nothing new\(^{18}\), but they do bring challenges and call for

revised practices within heritage management. A distinction between cultural use and cultural use is relevant for this model.

Conclusions
The different approaches to sacred objects in museum outlined in this paper pose different museological challenges and possibilities, and ascribe different agencies to museum staff as well as to the visitors. The question of the identity of an object – sacred, or not? – is crucial in order to handle, display and narrate religious objects in museums. In this paper I outline three models to point at how and by whom the identities are created: by the ones performing the musealisation, by the beholders, or by the ones deciding what uses to apply to the object at certain times. These models pose challenge the museums in terms of care and preservation, displays and narratives, and restrictions for handling and physical interaction. However, in a time of increasingly multi-cultural societies, tourism going more and more global with less and less homogenous beholders, and a post-secular curiosity for religion and sacredness, the museums need to open the cases and listen to the religious objects being kept there – they might be alive..!