

Introduction to the Special Issue “Religion in Museums”

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This Special Issue of *Religions* highlights the vital role museums play in mediating cultural values and educating the public about them. These two themes have been the focus of considerable scholarship within cultural studies and museum studies since the late 1990s. Carol Duncan’s (1995) *Civilizing Rituals* first alerted scholars to the religious dimensions of contemporary museum practices, thereby dramatically expanding the discussion of religion and museums in unforeseen ways. Despite Duncan’s timely intervention into a discourse that had tended to downplay the religious dimensions of museum collections and museum practices, and notwithstanding the central place of religious objects within many museums, this Special Issue responds to the ongoing need for further scholarship devoted to the topic of religion in museums. In fact, although the relevance of material culture to religious studies is now widely acknowledged, the topic of religion in museums received little focused attention until the publication of Crispin Paine’s (2013) pathbreaking work *Religious Objects in Museums*. More recently Gretchen Buggeln, Crispin Paine and S. Brent Plate have further opened up the topic in their edited book *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (Buggeln et al. 2017). On the practical side, museum directors and curators have grappled creatively with the issues raised by Duncan, Paine and others, and their efforts have borne fruit in such noteworthy museums as the St. Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life in Glasgow, Scotland, and the Museum of World Religions in Taipei, Taiwan (to name only two).

The aim of this Special Issue is to showcase work by scholars at the interface of religious studies, museum studies, philosophy, and cognate disciplines that addresses issues related to the curation and exhibition of religious objects in museums or to the representation of religious ideas and values within museums. The questions motivating the Special Issue include: How do museums address the sacred realm? In what ways are (different) religions represented in museums? How are religious objects transformed when they enter museum collections? Is the distinction between a “religious” and a “mundane” object a helpful one to keep? How do tangible objects convey religious ideas or values? How are religious objects used in museums? What ethical issues arise from the curation and display of religious objects? Articles in the Special Issue address these topics from angles that have been under-emphasized in the literature to date. Louise Tythacott and Chiara Bellini focus on Tibetan Buddhist objects, comparing their display in the sacralized context of Himalayan monastic museums to their display in the secular context of Western museums. The theme of secular museums is continued in an article by Marianna Shakhnovich that, taking an historical approach, focuses on the antireligious museums of Soviet Russia in the 1920s. Klas Grinell also takes up a highly politicized theme in his discussion of the ways museums currently handle Islamic material, particularly images of the Prophet Muhammad. These papers show the fecundity of the research that targets museum practices that concern specific categories of religious objects or specific ideological approaches to religion. Each article also points to new directions for future research.

The Special Issue also includes a brief report, “Change—But Not Enough Yet”, in which Crispin Wright reflects on current trends in the way museums handle religious

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objects. Wright also notes areas of museum practice that still leave room for refinement and opines that interpreting religious objects is likely to remain a key social role of museums for the foreseeable future. In view of this, he bewails the ongoing lacunae in research on visitor experience, as this might be expected to give some valuable indication of how well museums are doing in their efforts to interpret religious objects to their public.

The impression left by this Special Issue—and not unintentionally—is that despite the wealth of research now appearing on the broad theme of religion and museums there is still a need for further work, especially work that, enriched by increased sensitivity to the data provided by research on the experience of museum visitors, engages scholarly analysis with museum practice by focusing on religion in museums.

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