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# Interpreting Religion with Cultural Heritage Students

Paul Ariese

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## Abstract

The issue of exhibiting religious objects exemplifies challenges faced by heritage professionals today: How can various ways of appreciating cultural heritage be facilitated? How to support different forms of interpretation and learning? Furthermore, how to create empathy for people in other times, other places and other cultures? The elective course *Cultural Heritage & Religion* introduces students of the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts) to the material culture of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and stimulates them to formulate a stance regarding the potential as well as pitfalls of the presentation of religious objects. Museums sometimes seem to opt for a neutral, a static, and an aesthetic approach in the presentation of religious objects. However, it is important to note that museum displays that only highlight the art-historical or cultural-historical value of religious objects are all but neutral. Part of the story remains hidden, and therefore the full potential of these objects remains unused. Inspired by a combination of literature study, interactive seminars, and excursions to museums with religious object collections, as well as visits to Jewish, Christian, and Islamic places of worship, students suggest different approaches: Museums have the potential to touch and reach new audiences with religious objects by providing space for multiple interpretations and personal stories, and by including sensorial and emotional stimuli in the exhibition's design. As religious objects express both the highs and lows of life, they can function as mirror images with which diverse, contemporary audiences can identify.

**Key words:** Museums; material religion; religious objects; curating religion; museum and heritage studies

## Introduction

A critical reflection on how religion is addressed and avoided in museums in secular societies seems more than urgent for cultural heritage studies or museum studies programmes. In 2019, the journal *Religions* published a special issue on museums, in which Crispin Paine made a clear statement: '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'. At the same time, Paine, who has published widely on the topic of museums and religion (Paine 2000; Meyer *et al.* 2010; Paine 2012; Paine 2013; Buggeln *et al.* 2017b; Paine 2019a; etc), acknowledges the complexity of putting this into practice. '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' (Paine 2019b: 1, 3). In the same vein, Buggeln writes in *Interpreting Religion in Museums and Historic Sites*: 'The complexity and sensitivity of the subject is tremendous, but it is also important that museums not shy away'. She underlines the potential for museums to connect past and present, and envisions a role for museums as places of reflection and dialogue in an increasingly diverse and complex world (Buggeln & Franco 2018: xi). Commenting on the place of religion in art museums, Freudenheim suggests

that a generalized (art) historical approach to religious objects is a hindrance for contemporary museum audiences. In a secular society, awareness of the religious environments in which these objects once functioned and understanding of devotional practice and significance cannot be taken for granted. Paying attention to spiritual meanings can enrich the museum experience without requiring visitors to participate in religion as an adherent. Museums should not shy away from encouraging their visitors to doubt, appreciate or evade the power of religious objects in more imaginative forms of display (Freudenheim 2017: 182).

Against the backdrop of such considerations, the elective course *Cultural Heritage & Religion* was introduced into the Reinwardt Academy's undergraduate curriculum in 2018-2019 by the author of this paper. The Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts)<sup>1</sup> trains students to become all-round cultural heritage professionals. Reinwardt alumni work in museums, heritage institutions and archives, but also for the government, in the creative industries or tourist sector. Previously, the four-year programme paid little attention to religion and religious art, except for minor and superficial references in the art history and cultural history courses in the first two years. Whereas these courses focus on the aesthetic aspects and the (art-)historical context of works of art, the *Cultural Heritage & Religion* course takes a somewhat different approach. The core question of this course is whether and how emotions and ideas attached to religious objects from the Abrahamic faiths can be included in museum presentations. A point of interest is the varied, sometimes conflicting attitudes of institutions and audiences towards religious heritage. The course reframes this challenge as a call for engaging interpretive design, reflecting the statement of MacLeod *et al.* that museums should 'free themselves from the desire to create exhibitions full of information and (...), rather, open themselves up to creating spaces full of complexity, opportunity and possibility' (MacLeod *et al.* 2018: 5).

This article starts with a reflection on the background of the course and the complex topic of interpreting religion in museum settings. The next paragraph sheds light on the context of the course and the programme of the Reinwardt Academy in relation to broader social developments. Subsequently, the focus shifts to the course's didactic approach and design, followed by a reflection on the outcomes in the academic years 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. The article aims to present a blueprint for the setup of similar courses in other museum studies or cultural heritage studies programmes, while also suggesting implications for museum practice.

### **Religion and museums: A complex topic**

At first sight, museums and religion appear interwoven in many ways. The architectural form of many museums resembles the layout of a temple or church building. Museums and heritage sites can become sites of (tourist) pilgrimage. Important museum collections originate in religious spaces and practices. However, museums often opt for a neutral, singular and ocular-centric approach in the displays of religious objects, highlighting their aesthetics or reducing them to exhibits of cultural-historical developments (Paine 2013: 3-4; Berns 2015b: 8; Promey 2017: xxii). The heritagization of religious spaces or the musealization of religious objects means that they receive a different status, based on newly ascribed qualities. While the museum can sacralize works of art, it can also desacralize religious objects (Mairesse 2018: 13). Meyer and Witte observe that 'in many instances the reformation of religious forms as "heritage" entails a process of profanization through which their initial sacrality is being lost' (Meyer and De Witte 2013: 277). In summarizing the outcomes of the 2018 Symposium of the International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM) 'Museology and the Sacred' in Tehran, Iran, Mairesse points to differences in the nature, in the appearance and in the display schemes of the sacred when comparing religious space to museum space. He observes that 'the museum appears a particularly conducive space for discussion on the sacred' (Mairesse 2019: 651, 653).

The question here is how religious objects can best be approached in museums to encourage a dialogue among a wider audience. Paine criticizes the idea that the encounter with such objects can only be a mental and disembodied experience and suggests that religious objects have more to offer than just a feeling of awe and wonder aroused by their visual qualities: 'It's not until one has seen religious objects in use – either in an actual way

or in some virtual way – that they truly come alive, that one can get a glimpse, if you like, into the souls of these objects’ (Paine, as cited in Kuijten 2014: 9). The soul of these objects is irrevocably connected to their origin, and to a dynamic process of interpretation of creed and tradition. Not all religious objects are the same. In a 2006 report, the Association of Art Museum Directors described these objects as ‘venerated objects created for use in ritual or ceremonial practice’ in a religious context, or ‘religious works of art, which serve to express religious ideas, values, or feelings’.<sup>2</sup> As sources, carriers, or stimuli of religious concepts, ideas, and emotions, they have a direct impact on the believer. Paine approaches religion not merely as a system of ideas, but as a practice centred around objects: ‘Religion is essentially about doing – it’s not, for most people in the world, primarily about believing things with one’s mind, it’s primarily about doing things with one’s body. And when people do religion, they usually do it with things’ (Paine, as cited in Kuijten 2014: 2). Objects are understood here as ‘central to practices of mediation through which religious identities are represented and the “sacred” becomes manifest in the “world”’. As sensational forms, objects take part in ‘effecting the transcendental’ and ‘shape the content which they transmit’ (Meyer 2015: 59, 61). To consider religious objects as nothing more than utensils or masterpieces is limiting their potential. Religious objects express the highs and lows of life, serving as landmarks with which individuals or communities can identify and derive their meaning from a mix of rational, emotional, and multi-sensorial responses.

The positioning of the public museum institution as solely modern, progressive, and irreligious may be an obstacle for such answers (O’Neill 2011: 226; Promey 2017: xxi). Berns observes that: ‘... object-filled museums are often considered devotion-free and, as a result, evidence of reverence (such as kiss marks [on museum cases] or offerings) may be viewed as inappropriate’ (Berns 2015a: 163). O’Neill describes how museums have contributed to the modernity project: The removal of objects from traditional religious or cultural contexts to museums made them rational instruments for learning and inspiration. This transfer signified the replacement of ideas associated with religion, superstition and other forms of irrationality for the values associated with industrialized, liberal, capitalist and secular democracy (O’Neill 2011: 226). The rationalist approach to objects was influenced by Protestant beliefs and ideas, which privileged dematerialized relationships with the divine. As a consequence, embodied and emotional engagement with objects have long been ignored, suppressed or overlooked, in museum practice as well as in visitor research (Berns 2015a: 163; Berns 2015b: 42). If for historical reasons the interpretation of the Abrahamic faiths in museums is complicated, the approach of Asian religions and the religious heritage of peoples from formerly colonized countries is subject to even more challenges.

The question arises whether and how contemporary, increasingly diverse museum audiences can still relate to the pre-museum life of religious objects. This issue can be approached from different angles, as recent museum studies literature demonstrates:

- a Can religion be a theme on its own in museums, instead of a subcategory of art or popular culture? (Clifton 2007: 107; Paine 2013: 102);
- b How are objects desacralized or sacralized in the process of musealization? (Paine 2013: 2, 13-24; Van Eijnatten and De Nood 2018: 97);
- c Do musealized synagogues or churches evoke other forms of display of religious objects compared to purpose-built museum spaces? (Capurro 2018: 51; Knufinck 2018: 11; Rodov 2018: 57);
- d How do various visitors use the ‘neutral’ museum space, and do they possibly sanctify it when they approach religious objects? (Silverman 2010: 60; Paine 2013: 63-70; Buggeln and Franco 2018: 189);
- e What is the relationship between museums and religious communities? (Reeve 2012: 128; Paine 2013: 27-8; Carron *et al.* 2017: 202; Mairesse 2019: 651).

In the quest for new approaches, the *Cultural Heritage & Religion* course began by creating awareness of the above-mentioned issues, while also noting that this list could easily be

extended. This initial consideration was combined with an exploration of current practices, prompted by Reeve's characterization of the status quo: 'Most museums and galleries have material that relates to religions and other beliefs, but usually without any consistent approach to it. As a profession, we are still cautious about entering this particular secret garden' (Reeve 2012: 125).

### Understanding religion in a changing society

The Reinwardt Academy approaches cultural heritage as 'a concept used to denote objects, places and practices which people perceive in the present, with reference to the past, as being of essential importance' (Reinwardt Academy 2019: 9). Cultural heritage is not a static phenomenon, but a context-bound human construction. As a consequence, the values, interests and emotions involved in labelling items as cultural heritage are always subject to discussion (Dibbits 2015: 3). Questions concerning the positioning and interpretation of religious heritage exemplify such a debate. In present-day Dutch society most people no longer feel connected to institutional Christianity. In public opinion, the approach of Judaism, Christianity and Islam often lacks nuance. Public knowledge of religious stories and practices is slowly disappearing. However, even though traditional religion loses influence, churches close their doors and communities of faith do shrink or disappear, the role and impact of religion in the broader sense is all but diminishing. Spirituality is a growing market, and religion is central to the life of many migrants and expats. In this context, religious heritage can be assigned new roles, functions and meanings. These developments urge museums to change collection policies and require the inclusion of new perspectives and additional contextual information in their displays. The Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) states in *Klaar om te wenden (Ready to Turn)*, a report on the academic study of religion in the Netherlands: 'Fundamental and applied knowledge about the varied role and meaning of religion is necessary to interpret international developments and conflicts' (Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Sciences 2015: 96). The KNAW emphasizes the social responsibility of institutions that care for religious heritage:

The interpretation and impact of material and immaterial religious heritage is an essential topic in a changing society. The academic study of religion can take a more prominent place in the socio-cultural sector than it has done so far, among other things by showing, in collaboration with museums and cultural institutions, how the religious past leaves its mark on the present (Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Sciences 2015: 98).

In line with this call, Buggeln, Paine, and Plate stress that museums need more insight into how different visitors experience and understand religious objects. As the authors argue, the sector has a responsibility to work on this 'with intelligence, openness, sensitivity, and creativity'. This task requires a joint and multidisciplinary effort by a collective of museums and universities, scholars, and students (Buggeln *et al.* 2017b: 248-9).

While the theme of religion and cultural heritage has so far received limited attention in the Bachelor of Arts curriculum, it is not at all new for the Reinwardt Academy. It was the core of the project *Emotion Networking around Heritage in Educational Settings* (2018-2019) directed by Hester Dibbits (Professor Cultural Heritage and Programme Director of the international Master's degree programme in Museology at the Reinwardt Academy) and Marlous Willemsen (Director of Imagine IC). This project explored a method for sympathizing with others about religious ensembles. It investigated what happens in the classroom when young people, teachers, and heritage workers map and discuss their feelings about intangible, movable and immovable heritage items.<sup>3</sup>

Imagine IC and the Reinwardt Academy established the debate series *Intangible Heritage with 'Pop'*, in which old and new traditions, rituals and customs related to daily life in the big city are discussed. The third event in this series (19 June 2014) was entitled *Urban Spirits, present-day believing and the things by which we do it*, with Crispin Paine as its principal speaker (Kuijten 2014). Furthermore, the relationship between cultural heritage and religion was the topic of *This religious business* (18 January 2017), one of the debate evenings – so-called Heritage Arenas – organized by the Reinwardt Academy five times a year.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the average Reinwardt Academy student, probably much like the average museum visitor, does not have substantive knowledge of institutional religion and related religious practices. In the class of 2018-2019, five out of 25 students considered themselves Christian or Jewish, while half of the students explicitly described themselves as non-religious. Only three students attended a religious service at least once a month, while 40 per cent said they had never visited a service at all. In the class of 2019-2020 similar figures were noted. In both classes, none of the students identified themselves as Muslim. These figures cannot be seen in isolation from the fact that the faculty and student populations of the Reinwardt Academy insufficiently reflect the superdiverse city in which it is located. However, lacking an established link to religion is not the same as lacking interest in religion or religious heritage. Interest for the elective course exceeded expectations; in 2018-2019 the number of applicants outnumbered the number of available spaces.<sup>5</sup> Motives for joining varied: Some students indicated it was the lack of knowledge of religion and religious practice that drove them to enrol on the course; others considered it an opportunity to learn about the religious roots of their own family, or wanted to gain understanding of the role of religion in present-day society. Some students already demonstrated awareness of the complexities of exhibiting religious objects. As future heritage professionals, they considered it of vital importance to balance the different interests at stake here.

### Course design and teaching strategy

The course counted for 3 ECTS credits, corresponding to 84 hours of study.<sup>6</sup> The coordinating lecturer [i.e. the author] planned the instruction and activities on one full day per week, for practical reasons. As will be explained in detail below, the main characteristics of the eight-week programme were:

- a integrated learning activities which included a balanced combination of appropriate self-study texts, interactive seminars, and visits to museums and places of worship;
- b practice-oriented assignments which stimulated active processing of the literature and the visits;
- c a safe and open learning environment in which everyone felt free to express viewpoints.

### Starting points

The course and the assignments aimed to let the participants form an opinion on the display of religious objects in a museum context. The lecturer considered it crucial to start the course with an exploration of some core concepts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The introduction focused on the relation between material culture, religious practice, and the 'religious impulse' – the motives and emotions of the devotee. The goal was to challenge students to develop a sense of empathy and understanding for the different parties involved in the musealization process, such as source communities, museum staff, and various types of visitors. This approach followed the plea made by Paine in *Religious Objects in Museums*:

Religious objects in secular countries have a duty to help visitors to understand what this 'religion' business is all about (...) [They] have a duty to help their visitors empathize with religious people; because so much of religion is done with objects, religious objects in museums have a unique responsibility to help visitors understand religion (Paine 2013: 118).

### Learning goals

The learning goals followed Fink's 'Taxonomy of Significant Learning', a non-hierarchical model aimed at creating an integrated and interactive learning experience. In this model, knowledge acquisition is combined with learning relevant skills and the development of a professional attitude (Fink 2013: 35). In both academic years, the course guide described the learning goals as follows:



**a** *Foundational knowledge = master basic concepts*

Students gain a basic understanding and knowledge of how the three monotheistic religions shape the relationship between God and man through objects, rituals and practices.

**b** *Application = being able to apply knowledge*

Students develop an exhibition concept based on a religious object of their choice. In doing so, they apply knowledge of, and insight into the origin, context, meaning, and use of this object; they do so in such a way that this becomes understandable and experienceable for a non-expert audience.

**c** *Integration = linking to other fields and experiences from daily life*

Students can tackle, analyse, and evaluate museum projects involving religious objects, combining knowledge and skills gained in this and other modules.

**d** *Human dimension = indicate the impact of the learning experience on one's personal life and its relationship to other people\_*

Students analyse and evaluate the processes and experiences (readings, seminars, and excursions) during the course. Afterwards, they can explain how the course has shaped their vision of religious heritage and their understanding of the different positions of faith communities and museums.

**e** *Caring = feeling involvement with and passion for the subject*

Students feel involvement with religious heritage and demonstrate empathy towards how others experience and shape religion. They develop an interest in personal stories linked to religious objects.

**f** *Learning how to learn = gain insight into one's learning strategies and learning behaviour*

Students recognize the connections between the different parts of the course. They can identify, analyse, and evaluate the steps and choices they have made during the course.

**Assignments**

The participants were instructed to work on two assignments, each based on the learning goals, and intended to let them actively process the experiences during the course. Following Fink's definition of a 'forward looking assessment task', the assignments were formulated to be 'concrete, realistic, challenging, and based on practice' (Fink 2013: 96). The assignments related to knowledge and skills that students gained within this course or earlier in the Bachelor programme. Students were expected to substantiate their choices with arguments derived from the readings, seminars, and field visits during the course.

The first task was set up as a group assignment. The lecturer asked students to develop an audiovisual intervention in an existing museum display, aimed at highlighting emotions and ideas behind a religious object (or a group of objects). The group work format was a deliberate choice. Developing empathy and understanding was one of the learning goals, so students were challenged to cope with different viewpoints within their groups.

Secondly, the lecturer instructed the students to individually write and present an 'opinion column' of 850 words in which they articulated a personal reflection on what they had learned and experienced during the course.

### **Teaching strategy**

Because students appeared to have little knowledge about the subject, their uncertainty was a possible barrier for an optimal learning experience. A fellow lecturer even spoke about 'shame' felt among students about their lack of religious knowledge. An inclusive and safe learning environment was crucial. The coordinating lecturer demonstrated openness about his Protestant background and bias, and aimed to approach the contributions of the students with open-mindedness. The lecturer intended for all participants to feel equally valued for their input and questions, irrespective of their background knowledge or relation to religion. During the weekly seminars there was plenty of time reserved for discussions, debates, and reflection. *Nearpod*, an interactive classroom tool, allowed for a lot of student participation and engagement. The coordinating lecturer regularly gave feedback on group work and individual assignments, aiming to do so with a constructive undertone. Several Q&A sessions, meetings with heritage professionals and representatives of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faith communities were incorporated into the course; in practice this allowed for a vivid and open exchange of ideas. The Reinwardt Academy considers self-assessment a crucial aspect of professional behaviour for cultural heritage professionals. Therefore, the lecturer consciously discussed the teaching strategy and the criteria for the assignments with the students at the start of the course in order to enable them to evaluate their progress as the projects developed. Students also repeatedly commented on each other's work.

### **Programme**

The course programme constantly combined activities of 'getting information and ideas', 'doing and observing experiences', and 'reflection' (Fink 2013: 120). In the first half of the block, students studied a selection of chapters from two relevant titles, *Religion in Museums* (Buggeln *et al.* 2017a) and *Religious Objects in Museums* (Paine 2013) (A list of suggested literature has been included at the end of the article). Students processed the literature by writing down a core quote, a summary, and a personal question for each chapter. This approach helped them to grasp the essence of the readings. It also stimulated interaction in the classroom and provided them with material to individually write their 'opinion columns'.

The representation of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in museums was explored and discussed in a series of seminars during the first weeks. The tutorials intended to provide foundational insight into the material culture of these religions, related to the underlying beliefs and concepts. The tutorials also provided an opportunity for students to raise questions based on the studied literature. The seminars were delivered by Emile Schrijver, director of the Jewish Cultural Quarter in Amsterdam and his colleague Chief Curator Hetty Berg, and Reinwardt lecturers Paul Ariese, and Mirjam Shatanawi – the latter also in her capacity as former Curator Western Asia & North Africa at the Tropenmuseum, National Museum of World Cultures, in Amsterdam.

A series of visits to museums and religious services was also part of the course, as a means to experience the differences and possible overlap between those two spheres. For practical reasons, locations in or close to Amsterdam were chosen.<sup>7</sup> Both in 2018-2019 and in 2019-2020, a visit was paid to the nearby Jewish Cultural Quarter. The guided tour of the seventeenth century Portuguese Synagogue made clear how materiality and immateriality are intertwined and shaped by context. The sober, classicist architecture resembles that of Protestant churches from the same period, the architect Elias Bouman being the city's chief architect.<sup>8</sup> The interior, mostly unchanged over the centuries, can be considered a Protestant interpretation of how a synagogue should look. In the cellars beneath the synagogue's annexes the Treasure Rooms are located. Occasionally the objects leave the showcases here to be used in the services of the Portuguese Jewish Congregation – a striking example of different layers of meaning within the same collection.

The 2018-2019 class visited Museum Catharijneconvent,<sup>9</sup> the national museum for Christian art and culture in Utrecht. The programme included a guided tour of the temporary exhibition *Relics*, which focused on the veneration of relics as a universal, transcultural and living phenomenon. The exhibition showed Catholic and medieval relics, but also contemporary and secular pieces. An analysis was made of the museum's permanent exhibition, followed by



a Q&A session with Dr Anique de Kruijf, Head of Department Cultural Heritage in Churches and Convents and curator of *Relics*.

In 2019-2020, instead of Museum Catharijneconvent, two Amsterdam based institutions were visited: Museum Our Lord in the Attic and the Tropenmuseum. Our Lord in the Attic dates from 1663 and is one of the few remaining house churches from the seventeenth century, when the Calvinist city government did not allow Catholic citizens to celebrate Mass in public. Established in 1888 by the Catholic foundation Amstelkring, the museum was originally a showcase of Catholic faith and life in Amsterdam. Today visitors to Museum Our Lord in the Attic experience the historic house as it was when it served as a parish church. In a new adjacent building, one can find thematic exhibitions and educational programmes on the freedom of religion and of conscience. Senior Curator and Head of Collections, Research and Presentation Hermine Pool and Head of Education Anouk Custers welcomed the class, and explained the museum's quest for relevancy in present-day Amsterdam society. An example is the educational programme *Voices of Tolerance*, which includes presentations and debates on the actual value of tolerance, and is considered an actualization of the history of the site.<sup>10</sup>

In the Tropenmuseum, the students explored the temporary exhibition *Longing for Mecca*. This exhibition was based on the British Museum exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* (2012) and combined more than 300 Islamic art works and objects from the tenth century to the present day, from Indonesia and China to Turkey and Morocco.<sup>11</sup> It was noted that the Tropenmuseum was successful in drawing a diverse audience, including many Muslim visitors. Visitors experienced the hajj through personal stories of Dutch pilgrims. Dr Luit Mols, one of the curators, answered any questions students had and explained some of the dilemmas faced by the project team in order to balance different interests. Whether the museum should allow or facilitate prayer in the exhibition led to discussion. Most students considered it problematic to give room to explicit religious practices, as these would alienate other visitors. Some students criticized what they saw as an overall positivist approach of the hajj. The underrepresentation in the exhibition of Shiite Islam was also questioned: the one small painting of Shiite origin of the prophet Muhammed was hidden behind a veil, only to become visible when visitors pushed a button. Some students considered the museum too cautious by avoiding mentioning the controversies around such portraits in the caption. The counterargument here was that such highly sensitive issues and long-standing debates cannot be reduced to a few lines of text.

To broaden perspectives, the author included examples from other European countries in the seminars, such as the Occidens Museum in Pamplona Cathedral and the Alma Mater Museum in Zaragoza, the exhibition *Obedience* (2015) in the Jewish Museum in Berlin, Kolumba Museum in Cologne and the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, and the Jubilee Galleries in Westminster Abbey, as well as the already mentioned exhibition *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* at the British Museum and the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Some of these museums are linked to church buildings, which triggered discussions about the dominance of institutional narratives within. Students with a religious background seemed more sensitive to the idea that a museum in or linked to (former) religious space is different to museums with no religious affiliation.

In addition to the museum excursions, the classes visited three Amsterdam-based religious communities: they attended a Shabbat service at the Liberal Jewish Congregation, a Mass at the Basilica of St Nicholas, and afternoon prayers at the Fatih Mosque. The latter is the home to a Turkish-Dutch community and is located in a converted Jesuit church from the late 1920s. In all cases, members and leaders of these communities warmly welcomed the group and answered any questions students had concerning the buildings, the religious practices, and the underlying concepts. Students learned about the ideas and motivations of different individual community members. Some spoke mainly in spiritual wording while others indicated that they did not consider themselves as outspoken believers: 'My main reason to come here is to have an encounter with the community, not with God'. Each visit concluded with a short reflection session in which only the students and the lecturer participated. These dialogues stimulated students to share their individual experiences and provided them with an opportunity to ask for clarification concerning things they had failed to understand.

In the second half of the course the attention shifted to writing the 'opinion column' and

elaborating on the audiovisual concept. The programme included several sessions in which students received feedback from each other as well as the lecturer on their progress so far. Students attended a workshop about developing a synopsis and a treatment (a description of the different scenes in the audiovisual concept). Gradually they developed the knowledge, insights, and skills required to fulfil the given assignments.

The group presentations of the audiovisual concepts took place on the final day of the programme. Following the pitch presentations all individual students read their individual 'opinion columns' out loud, with the rest of the class functioning as an attentive audience. Each presentation allowed a short discussion.

## Reflections on the outcomes of the course

### *Formative evaluation*

Halfway through the course, students were asked what insights they had developed so far. At that stage, students reported to have gained more understanding of similarities between the faiths but also saw the diversity within them. The visits to the religious services in the Liberal Jewish Congregation, the St Nicholas Basilica and the Fatih Mosque were considered an essential and highly valued ingredient of the course. Many students reported that they were touched by these encounters. Joining the services and encountering objects in situ made students more sensitive to the immaterial aspects of religious objects. The meetings also added nuance to their idea of a monolithic faith community.

Furthermore, it became clear that the open conversations with representatives of the Jewish Historical Museum, Museum Catharijneconvent, Museum Our Lord in the Attic, and the Tropenmuseum provided the students with valuable insights into the dilemmas behind the scenes. Students recognized various issues regarding musealized religious objects: The dilemmas that arise when objects leave their original context and enter the museum sphere; the dominance of the curator's voice compared to source communities in the interpretation of these objects; the question of whether a group of believers can claim to be the only source community; and the challenge of dealing with divergent views and foreknowledge among the audience. This realization was also informed by the discussions in the classroom setting, the visits to places of worship and the literature that was studied. Museums play an important role in the representation of religion. This requires nuance and sensitivity on the part of exhibition makers. Paine warns of the danger of generalization in museum presentations when it comes to religion. In practice, diversity is the rule even within religious communities (Paine 2013: 110). This issue could be addressed by being specific about the objects on display, in terms of context of use and origin. Multivocality was suggested as a possible solution: During one of the first seminars, Hetty Berg of the Jewish Historical Museum explained how in the permanent display on religion in the musealized Great Synagogue visitors could watch short audiovisuals showing liberal and orthodox, as well as historic and contemporary interpretations of the objects. As Buggeln, Paine and Plate argue, multivocality in presentations may also support accessibility for the increasingly diverse audience. The interpretation by the curator is not the same as the interpretation by the audience. In the end, visitors follow their own motives for visiting, make meaning themselves, and should be actively triggered to do so (Paine 2013: 24; Buggeln *et al.* 2017c: 2).

One of the seminars was set up as a debate. The coordinating lecturer provided a series of statements, based on the various questions that students had written down as they processed the readings. Statements included: 'Source communities should have the final say in the display of religious objects'; 'Rather than transferring information, the display of religious objects should primarily trigger senses and emotions'; and 'Re-enactment of religious processions in open-air museums is sacrilege'. Each time, one half of the class defended the statement, while the other half was assigned the role of opponent by the lecturer. The fact that statements and roles were assigned made it easier for the students to declare themselves in favour of or against a particular statement and added to their feeling of safety. The debate format turned out to be extremely helpful in making students aware of opinions and positions different from their own, as well as in challenging them to articulate a vision. From a lecturer's point of view, the debate was also an effective way of activating the knowledge that students had gained during the literature study.

### **Group work assignment: Audiovisual concepts**

The assignment for the audiovisual concept required research into the context and background of the object that was chosen, an analysis of the existing museum display, and the development of a synopsis for the audiovisual intervention, as well as an artist impression of the intervention. The groups chose objects from museums visited or discussed during the course. The assignment required informed decisions in terms of content, ethics, and design. The proposals demonstrated how participants were touched and inspired by the experiences and ideas encountered during the course and showed that students were aware of the role of emotion and empathy in exhibition design. An example from the 2018-2019 class was the concept of a shadow play projection behind the small sixteenth century Maria Lactans sculpture on display in the first gallery of Museum Catharijneconvent. The projection suggested the presence of a small group of women in various stages of life, approaching the sculpture. Their movements suggested an act of devotion. However, as a result of the chosen figurative format, the image allowed visitors to interpret it according to their imagination. A second example was the script for a short and intimate movie on the life cycle of a *tallit* (prayer shawl), on display at the Jewish Historical Museum. At the core of this movie were close-up shots of hands holding and handling the *tallit*, as a reference to its original context and use, from *bar mitzvah* to burial.

In the 2019-2020 class, one of the groups proposed an intervention in *Longing for Mecca*. The students chose a 400-year-old Kiswa cloth, an impressive five-metres high curtain originally used to cover the door of the holy Ka'ba. The group turned what they – as outsiders – perceived as an aesthetic display into a son-et-lumière presentation. For this purpose, the group made audio recordings of their Muslim friends, meditating in response to the embroidery of the Quranic verses on the curtain. Visitors could listen to these testimonies, while spotlights subsequently highlighted the different parts of the cloth. With this proposal, they aimed to give all visitors insight into the spiritual meaning of the object.

### **Individual assignment: Opinion columns**

Students could define a topic of their own choice for their 'opinion column', as long as they met the requirement of making references to the course content. Recalling their own experiences during the excursions, several students stated that museum institutions too often assume prior knowledge concerning the original context, use and meaning of religious objects. These students reported a feeling of being lost, simply because they lacked a proper frame of reference. They criticized displays that merely highlighted historical, cultural or aesthetic aspects. Students called upon museums to pay more attention to the religious ideas, the rituals and the experiences of believers associated with objects. Students suggested that this could partly be achieved by cooperating more closely with religious communities. The expertise of museum staff and the stories shared by members of these communities could thus reinforce each other. In general, the participating students did not consider such testimonials a form of evangelization; they combined confidence towards their own position with an openness to learn about other peoples' viewpoints. Simultaneously, some students outside the class indicated that they had not joined the elective course because the title *Cultural Heritage & Religion* for them had a connotation of evangelization. Nevertheless, the standpoint of the participating students echoed Graham Howes' analysis of the successful exhibition *Seeing Salvation. The Image of Christ* at the National Gallery in London (2010):

In a predominantly post-Christian culture like much of the West, it seems that any future relationship between religion and the visual arts, and especially religious objects and religious experience, is not necessarily as tenuous or problematic as it is so often presupposed to be (Howes 2017: 98).

### **Summative evaluation**

At the conclusion of the course, students in both classes reported once more to have gained further insight into religion, into religious practice and the earlier mentioned 'religious impulse'

of the devotee. Students noted a better understanding of the role and position of heritage professionals in dealing with religious objects. They agreed with the idea that religious objects are not relics of the past, but signs that carry meaning for the present. The course participants supported the concept of the museum as a space of dialogue and reflection, a place that allows for an open exploration of questions about human dignity and vulnerability. This solution reflects the argument of Paine when writing on museums and material religion: 'Museum workers are charged with the great task of helping our visitors to join in humankind's search for meaning' (Paine 2012: 8). The lecturer stated that an exhibition that respects and reveals the background of religious 'mirror images' has the potential to make visitors reflect on the motives behind human behaviour, which also creates space for self-reflection. Students agreed on the need for such contemplative spaces in today's diverse and fast-changing society and mediascape. In a parallel manner Duncan argues that exhibitions in art museums 'constitute an arena in which a community may test, examine, and imaginatively live both older truths and possibilities for new ones' (Duncan 1995: 133).

In general, Dutch citizens favour the idea of religious tolerance, the students being no exception. At the current time, an incident like the deliberate damaging of a Shiva statue by a member of the public in the St Mungo Museum of Religious Art and Life in Glasgow (1993) has not been reported in a Dutch museum. Students repeatedly indicated that they supported the idea of the museum as a workshop for tolerance. However, their conception of the exhibition *Longing for Mecca* made the class of 2019-2020 emphasize that the museum should not hide from controversial aspects of religious culture. For museums, this would involve changing the regular ocular-centric approach for a focus on experience and interaction. By presenting, comparing, contextualizing and questioning religious objects and related ideas, museums might stimulate insight and mutual understanding. In the 2018-2019 class, one student suggested that the juxtaposition of religious and non-religious objects was helpful as a way of opening up the dialogue between secular and non-secular audiences. She referred to Museum Catharijneconvent which, in the exhibition *Relics*, displayed a replica of the Maradona altar in Bar Nilo, Naples, next to relics with a Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist origin. However, another student fiercely opposed this combination, considering it a desecralization of the religious relics. In terms of a learning experience, it was interesting to point to these opposing positions: a heritage professional is neither neutral nor objective.

Some participants expressed reservations regarding whether museums could offer an experience of the sacred. Museums can only communicate to a limited extent the practices and experiences of religion, which is another level of meaning. Even within faith communities, people practice and experience their faith in myriad ways. Nevertheless, students in both classes saw a lot of potential in a more daring exhibition design approach: Less static and object focused, and more vivid, speaking to mind, body, and soul. According to the students, visitors should be involved in the full sense of the word, with exhibition designs that trigger the imagination and echo the multisensorial experience of the religious ritual.

## Conclusions

Museums that want to promote empathy in a diverse society, and that want to engage audiences with different motives and expectations, face a serious task. The elective course *Cultural Heritage & Religion* challenged undergraduate students at the Reinwardt Academy to consider these issues in the context of the musealization of religion and the exhibiting of religious objects. To this end, the course juxtaposed the perspectives of a selection of Dutch faith communities and museums with collections of religious objects. This comparison was instrumental in making students aware of their own assumptions and prejudices. Two things stood out in the projects that the Reinwardt students developed in 2018-2019 and 2019-2020: First is their typical Dutch preference for tolerance and dialogue as a solution to overcome differences. Second is the students' keen interest in the stories behind the aesthetic qualities of religious objects. To a limited extent, participating students knew about Catholicism, Protestantism, or Judaism, whereas with Islam, they were less familiar. Making diversity a starting point for dialogue and reflection turned out to be one of the strengths of the course. Due to a lack of background knowledge or limited personal experience with religious practices, students had

difficulty understanding the representation of Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious heritage in established institutions such as the Jewish Cultural Quarter, Museum Catharijneconvent, or the Tropenmuseum. During the course, it became apparent that there is no such thing as a monolithic Judaism, Christianity or Islam. This variation surprised students and made them aware of the challenge for museums to represent the many sides of religion (Paine 2013: 21; Shatanawi 2019: 373). Students observed that the religious heritage of migrant communities and of non-institutional forms of believing is only slowly finding its way into Dutch museums. Future course programmes should also pay more attention to this gap.

The critical issues for a similar course may be different in countries previously subjected to colonial occupation, often rife with long-lasting tensions between religious groups, or in countries with more vigorous opposition towards migrant or minority groups: How does the dominance of one religious group curb the representation and understanding of other religions? How should museums deal with communities that claim ownership of musealized religious objects? What should museums do if religious groups fiercely oppose the display of particular objects? How does the relationship between church and state impact museums? For museums, a shared challenge is how to avoid stereotypes, how to avoid conscious or unconscious silencing of voices and, once a polyphonic approach is adopted, how to steer clear of cacophony. Pointing out these pitfalls seems a crucial element for any course in museum studies or cultural heritage studies. In this regard, the topic of religious heritage undeniably remains thought-provoking.

Religious objects are not static phenomena but active agents. We should train future heritage colleagues to approach these collections with an attitude of professional devotion, and challenge students to speak to the hearts of diverse audiences. In a setting that evokes emotional and embodied responses, religious objects can act as conversation pieces. The stories of how religious practices have shaped and still shape the world for both good and ill need to be shared and explored. If musealized religious objects still dwell in 'this particular secret garden' (Reeve 2012: 125) then let us enter this place with curiosity and courage, let us listen to different voices, and let sensibility go hand in hand with creativity.

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#### **Recommended literature for an undergraduate course on cultural heritage and religion**

- 1) Buggeln, G., Paine, C. and Brent Plate, S. (eds) (2017) *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, London: Bloomsbury.
- 2) Buggeln, G. and Franco, B. (eds) (2018) *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- 3) Mairesse, F. (ed) (2018) *Museology and the Sacred. Materials for a Discussion. Papers from the ICOFOM 41st Symposium Held in Tehran (Iran), 15-19 October 2018*, Paris: ICOFOM.
- 4) Kessler, K., Knufinke, U., Von Kienlin, A. and Weber, A. (eds) (2018) *Synagogue and Museum*, Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag.
- 5) Minucciani, V. (ed) (2013) *Religion and Museums: Immaterial and Material Heritage*, Turin: Umberto Allemandi & C.
- 6) Paine, C. (2013) *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*, London: Bloomsbury.
- 7) Sullivan, B.M. (ed) (2015) *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums*, London: Bloomsbury.

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## Notes

- 1 The Reinwardt Academy, a faculty of the Amsterdam University of the Arts, offers a Bachelor's programme in cultural heritage and a Master's programme in Applied Museum and Heritage Studies, and has a professorship on cultural heritage. For more information, see <https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/>.
- 2 Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), 'Report on the Stewardship and Acquisition of Sacred Objects', New York, 2006. <https://aamd.org/sites/default/files/document/Sacred%20Objects%20Guideline%2008.06.pdf>, accessed 18 September 2020.
- 3 ImagineIC, 'Emotienetwerken'. <https://imagineic.nl/ontwikkelen/emotienetwerken/>, accessed 18 September 2019.
- 4 Dewi Kuen, 'This Religious Business', Reinwardt Community, 12 June 2017. <https://www.reinwardtcommunity.nl/nl/page/16288/this-religion-business>, accessed 9 May 2019.
- 5 The management has set a maximum of 25 participants for elective courses. In 2018-2019, 28 students applied. The number of applicants was 19 in 2019-2020. At that time, students could choose from more courses compared to the previous year.
- 6 ECTS is the EU system for calculating study load. 60 ECTS is equivalent to one year of study; see: [https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/european-credit-transfer-and-accumulation-system-ects_en). Based on student evaluations, the coordinating lecturer changed the number of ECTS credits from three to four (112 hours of study) in 2019-2020.
- 7 In a lucky coincidence, in both academic years the studies trip to Scotland took place just the week before the course started. In Glasgow, most students were able to visit the much-discussed St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art.
- 8 Jewish Cultural Quarter, 'The Portuguese Synagogue'. <https://jck.nl/en/longread/portuguese-synagogue>, accessed 18 September 2019.
- 9 Museum Catharijneconvent, <https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/>, accessed 27 June 2020.
- 10 Museum Our Lord in the Attic, <https://www.opsolder.nl/en>, accessed 27 June 2020.
- 11 Tropenmuseum, <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/longing-mecca>, accessed 27 June 2020.

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**Author**

Paul Ariese  
Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts)  
Hortusplantsoen 2  
1018 TZ Amsterdam  
The Netherlands  
[paul.ariese@ahk.nl](mailto:paul.ariese@ahk.nl)  
<https://www.reinwardt.ahk.nl/>

**Author bio**

Paul Ariese has been affiliated with the Reinwardt Academy (Amsterdam University of the Arts) since 2015, as a senior lecturer in the international Master's programme and the Bachelor's programme, where he lectures on heritage and religion, among other subjects. Ariese's research, which is embedded in the programme of the Reinwardt Academy Cultural Heritage Research Group, focuses on musealized religious spaces.

Ariese has been involved in numerous projects for museums and heritage institutions all over the Netherlands, as well as museum projects and museum capacity building programmes in the Middle East, East Africa, and South(east) Asia. Ariese studied graphic design (Artez School of the Arts) and architectural design (Rietveld Academy) and obtained an MA (with distinction) in Museum Studies (University of Leicester).