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Museums and religious heritage: Post-colonial and post-socialist perspectives

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Cyril ISNART & Nathalie CEREZALES, 2020. *The religious heritage complex: Legacy, conservation, and Christianity*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 280 p.

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The title ‘religious heritage complex’ is a crucial term proposed by the editors and used extensively by the authors of this fascinating and multifaceted interdisciplinary volume. In its general meaning the word ‘complex’ evokes both connections as well as complications and the book skilfully explores these aspects. All 13 chapters, which discuss various historical and contemporary cases, direct the reader’s attention towards enmeshed links and entanglements between religious and heritage domains. The main focus is on “the continuity between the *habitus* of conservation of the past within religious traditions and a conscious *policy* regarding the care of the past in heritage contexts” (p. 6) as well as “the coexistence of two different layers of values attributed to religious practices and materiality” (p. 6). These statements are reflected in an approach which – instead of concentrating on differences and conflicts – explores convergences and collaborations. By adopting this perspective as a starting point, the contributors are able to discover non-obvious alliances between various social actors and combinations of both ‘religious’ and ‘heritage’ discourses. Contextual analysis of these usages in many of the chapters reveals a lively and rather vast, yet complicated and multi-layered religious-heritage meeting zone.

In the first chapter, Eva Löfgren and Ola Wetterberg focus on the reconstruction of Katarina Church in Stockholm after a devastating fire in 1990. Drawing on the concept of “practiced duality” (p. 16), they analyse entanglements of religion and heritage. This duality revealed itself in actions initiated by the Lutheran parishioners, the Swedish state, architects and art historians, and regular Stockholmers. This chapter is very timely because it provides useful tools for understanding yet another, recent, church reconstruction – namely, that of Notre-Dame in Paris. The second chapter, by Cristina Clopot, shows how Old Believers in Romania skilfully combine heritage and religious settings to preserve their spiritual practice of iconography and the material tissue of their churches. Despite many tensions, the religious communities discussed in the chapter participate in heritagisation and use it for their spiritual aims and identity formation. The third chapter also focuses on the heritage of religious tradition which is perceived as marginal at the national level. Here, Aude Aylin de Tapia discusses the historical and contemporary religious heritage complex of the Greek-Orthodox churches in Cappadocia. Due to the 1923 population exchange between Greece and Turkey these religious buildings were left without their hosts and heirs. The author’s diachronic perspective, stretching between the 19th-century late Ottoman period and contemporary Turkey, reveals the crucial role of state policy in “the making, unmaking, and remaking” (p. 51) of a religious heritage complex connected with Ottoman-Christian sites.

Official preservation policy is also explored in two chapters dedicated to French case studies. Gaspard Salatko analyses convergences in the preservation discourses of religious and state cultural heritage institutions. He also recounts examples of discrepancies appearing between religious practice, aesthetic evaluation, and various modes of restoration.

A religious heritage complex lens allows him to observe subtle interconnections as well as the fluidity and porosity of the ‘secular’ and the ‘sacred’. The second French case study focuses exclusively on Catholic churches and their policy regarding tourism.

Isabelle Saint-Martin begins with a historical overview of the 19th- and early 20th-century cultural interest in cathedrals as historical buildings and embodiments of “the genius of France” (p. 83). She then discusses more recent Catholic managerial responses to tourism combined with evangelisation strategies.

Similar issues, but drawn from the Italian context, are discussed in the chapter by Giovanna Rech, where she scrutinises the Roman Catholic Church’s tourism policy. Tourist visits to religious buildings are often seen as an opportunity for evangelisation through heritage and art. Yet another setting of the religious heritage complex is recalled by Nathalie Cerezales in her study of Spanish Holy Week processions with *Pasos* sculptures in Valladolid. The entangled historical and political context of this invented tradition is combined with the materiality of the *Pasos*, their museumification and attribution of artistic value. “Managing ambivalence” is a Church strategy towards tourism diagnosed by Cyril Isnart, whose chapter presents an ethnographically grounded study of the Catholic shrine of St Anthony of Padua in Lisbon. A subtly promoted ambivalence creates an inclusive environment which is comfortable for various actors and visitors while maintaining the religious dimension of the saint and his shrine.

The following three chapters refer to non-European settings whose link with Christian tradition is grounded in colonial and missionary encounters. Mariana Ramos de Moraes presents heritage strategies connected with the Candomblé temples in Brazil. Recognition of some of these sites as national heritage involves an appreciation of Afro-Brazilian identity. Heritagisation is also used by the Candomblé practitioners to justify their religious status which, however, is being challenged by a growing Evangelical movement. Next, recognition of *vodun* as religion through the heritagisation of Benin’s slave history is investigated by Gaetano Ciarcia. He points to the historical discrepancies between indigenous and missionary-influenced elite discourses as well as contemporary understandings of slavery by Beninese and African-Americans. In the next chapter, Ethan Sharp examines the material vernacular religious tradition of a minority group and the process of museumification in the context of Mexican home altars exhibited in American museums. His analysis draws on assemblage theory, an interesting trope which enriches the religious heritage complex perspective.

The final two chapters consist of extensive interviews conducted by the volume’s editors. Cyril Isnart’s discussion with Jean Fontaine concerns the Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes (IBLA) in Tunis led by the White Fathers. Here, Christian-Arabic religious heritage encounters intermingle with a personal life story of Fr. Fontaine (who died one year after the book’s publication, at the age of 84). Nathalie Cerezales converses with José Francisco Blanco Fandiño, the director of the Education and Cultural department of the cathedral

of Santiago de Compostela. His reflections give a fascinating insight into the religiously-based management of one of the most popular religious heritage sites in Europe.

Taken as a whole, the volume convincingly presents the religious heritage complex as a valuable perspective which enables scholars to free themselves from oversimplifications often connected with religious-heritage or spiritual-secular dualism. The religious heritage complex does not mean the erasure of discrepancies and tensions; rather, it encourages cautious contextual analysis open to blurred, fluid and porous categorisations as they are practiced by individuals, groups, and institutions. In the Introduction, Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales notice that “it is difficult to separate religion and heritage. Using the religious heritage complex as a lens can help us better understand how religion interacts with heritage policies and discourses” (p. 9).

Yet, some questions and possible limitations of this perspective also need to be considered. The volume – as clearly stated by the editors and marked in the book’s subtitle – concerns one particular yet globally influential religious tradition, namely Christianity. Christian conceptualisations of temporality, past, continuity and preservation create a “religious *habitus* of conservation” (p. 7) which is in line with many contemporary heritage-oriented discourses and practices. However, this process needs to be approached critically, especially in the context of Unesco policies regarding various religious heritages and the dominant, yet often subconsciously applied, normativity of Christian conceptualisations. The editors of the book seem to be aware of this, as they close the volume with a call for further discussion and confrontation “with other religious traditions and cultural heritage regimes” (p. 217).

Published two years ago the volume has already been discussed in various fora and should be regarded as a significant conceptual contribution to interdisciplinary critical research on religious heritages. The chapters provide a fascinating range of case studies revealing a variety of actors, practices, objects, and discourses involved in religious heritage complex formations.