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Religious Minority Voices and Heritage

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MODULE 10. RELIGIOUS MINORITY VOICES AND HERITAGE

THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION BY TODD WEIR, ANDREW IRVING AND MATHILDE VAN DIJK

There is a growing awareness among heritage organisations that Europe's religious minorities have largely been absent from heritage in two ways. First, although minorities have always been present and played a key role in European culture and society, their history has generally not been reflected in the most prestigious sites of national heritage. Museums, castles and cathedrals have generally focussed on the dominant social groups or the majoritarian population. Second, many of the minority communities who now make a large and growing part of the European societies have, until recently, not taken part in the process of assigning meaning to public heritage. Several factors have coincided to raise public awareness that a change is needed. New international guidelines, such as the Faro Convention and the UNESCO Strategic development goals, have called for the democratisation of heritage. The recent controversies over public monuments of American Civil War generals and European colonial heroes have strengthened the resolve of museum curators, heritage organisations and activists to find ways to make religious heritage more diverse and inclusive. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, organisations and individuals representing minority groups have begun their own heritage projects. They are recalling obscured histories and giving them the breath of public life through acknowledgement as heritage, and they are doing so from above as well as from below.

An example of the pluralization of heritage “from above” is the project Jewish Country Houses, which is a collaboration between Oxford University and the National Trust. The posh manor houses made available to the public by the National Trust are the jewels in the crown of British national heritage. Highlighting the Jewish identity of some of their owners may not seem revolutionary, however, diversifying this core area of British national heritage fractures its implicit identification with the Christian, white gentry, which has been made familiar to viewers worldwide through films and television series, from *Upstairs Downstairs* to *Pride and Prejudice* or *Downton Abbey*.⁵⁹

The UK has also been the site of innovative grassroots heritage efforts from below. Marcus

59 Abigail Green and Juliet Carey, 'Beyond the Pale: The Country Houses of the Jewish Élite', *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 18, no. 4 (18 September 2019): 393–98

60 Marcus R. Roberts, *The Jewish Heritage of Lincoln Cathedral: The First Jewish Heritage Trail of a Major Christian Building in England* (Oxford: Oxford Heritage Press, 2015).

61 Tharik Hussain, 'Why I Created Britain's Muslim Heritage Trails and Why We Need More of Them', *The Muslim 500: The World's Most Influential Muslims*, n.d., <https://themuslim500.com/guest-contributions-2020/why-i-created-britains-muslim-heritage-trails-and-why-we-need-more-of-them/#>.

62 Kroesen, 'Recycling Sacred Space: The Fate of Financially Burdensome and Redundant Church Buildings in the Netherlands'.

Roberts developed a walking tour of the Lincoln Cathedral, which brings viewers to consider negative and positive depictions of Jews in the cathedral sculptures. It thereby integrates Jews in the history of mediaeval England prior to their expulsion in 1290. Roberts's work in Lincoln connects to a larger project called J-Trails, which inserts Jewish heritage into the network of pilgrimage-tourist routes across Europe.⁶⁰ In a parallel development, journalist Tharik Hussain delved into the past of South England and designed a series of Muslim Heritage Trails that allow visitors to discover Muslim built heritage in and around the town of Woking. By inscribing them in the national heritage map, such efforts give religious minorities a purchase on the symbolic past of the country and disrupt the notion of a single national heritage.⁶¹

Heritage is also being used to foster interreligious conversations. The shared use of religious buildings by different faiths has often proven problematic due to religious sensibilities. Some congregants of Reformed Dutch churches have objected to sharing their underutilized churches with Pentecostal or Muslim congregations, and in other countries, conflicts have recently flared over buildings that are interreligious in their histories.⁶² The Hagia Sofia, which had been a site of shared Christian and Muslim cultural heritage in Istanbul, was recently redesignated a mosque by Turkish authorities. And despite Spanish celebration of the interreligious heritage of the “convivencia” of Jews, Muslims and Christians in medieval Spain, the Catholic Church has resisted efforts by some Muslim activists to allow dual use of the former mosque--and now cathedral--in Cordoba.⁶³

63 Grier, Burchardt, and Astor, ‘European Identities’.

64 ‘Inayat Omarji Wins Heritage Angel Award for Rescue of All Souls Bolton’, Churches Conservation Trust, News, 4 November 2014, <https://www.visitchurches.org.uk/what-we-do/news/inayat-omarji-wins-heritage-angel-award-for-rescue.html>.

65 ‘Feesten uit de nieuwe wereld in een oude kerk’, Roder Journaal, 7 July 2020; ‘Feest! In Oost en West’, Schoolkerk, Lespakketten, n.d., <https://www.schoolkerk.nl/lespakketten/feest-in-oost-en-west>.

66 Anne ter Borg, Sytske Nijdam, and Sander Vroom, ‘Educatie om bakens van betekenis te bewaren’, Toekomst religieus erfgoed, 2020, <https://www.toekomstreligieuserfgoed.nl/artikelen/educatie-om-bakens-van-betekenis-te-bewaren>.

67 Betts, Ruin and Renewal; Adrian Hänni, ‘A Global Crusade against Communism: The Cercle in the “Second Cold War”’, in *Transnational Anti-Communism and the Cold War*, ed. Luc van Dongen, Stéphanie Roulin, and Giles Scott-Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 161–74.,

While the shared religious use of historic buildings has sometimes proven problematic, the shared caring for these buildings as heritage has been less so. Without the help of non-Jewish volunteers, many of the historic synagogues across Europe could not remain open to the public. An analogous situation is faced by underutilised or unused churches in immigrant neighbourhoods in European cities. As the congregations there dwindle and residents with past family ties to the churches move out, who will care for the churches? A pioneering example in this regard is the collaboration between the Churches Conservation Trust and a local activist, Inayat Omarji, who happens to be Muslim, to jointly transform the All Souls church in Bolton into a community center.⁶⁴

Heritage organisations and government agencies are aware that heritage events attract an elderly audience and that future viability depends on stimulating younger generations to care for religious heritage. Some have combined this task with efforts to use heritage sites for interreligious education. In 2020, the Groningen Historic Church Foundation inaugurated its “School Church” in the town of Garmerwolde, which features an exhibit in the church tower that uses Muslim and Christian holidays as a fun way to entice school age children into understanding these two religious cultures. The focus on holidays highlights the cultural side of immaterial religious heritage, but the makers of the exhibit did not shy away from conceptual artworks that try to evoke reflection on spiritual matters.⁶⁵ Because the Islamic and Christian religious content flows together and is mediated by contemporary design, this exhibition strikes as a prime example of a postsecular approach to heritage, which uses art to evoke “spiritual” responses and spark children’s interest. However, it may raise the eyebrows of parents who are either religiously purist or, by contrast, ardently secularist.⁶⁶

There is a growing consensus among heritage organisations that they should promote minority heritage, but how is this to be balanced with the need felt by many Europeans to also honour dominant religious traditions? Certainly, the notion of a shared heritage of Latin Christendom played an important role in the drive for European unity in the 1950s by an international alliance of Christian Democrats.⁶⁷ The public power of traditional churches is still very much present today as a heritage of this past era of state churches and can be seen in the religious education in schools, special broadcasts in public media and even public holidays. National courts have generally upheld the right of public institutions to display the religious symbols, such as the crucifix, of those churches that once enjoyed the status of being established by law, arguing that these form cultural heritage. The European Court of Human Rights has generally supported member states in these decisions.⁶⁸ Local community identity, particularly in Southern Europe, is very often wrapped up with procession and festivals celebrating patron saints of towns and villages. Such attachments need to be taken into account, when promoting more inclusive forms of heritage. If inclusive efforts do not take place in dialogue with majoritarian conceptions of heritage they run the risk of contributing further to social polarization, given that it is already being used to accomplish this by rightwing populists.

68 Lori G. Beaman, ‘Battles Over Symbols: The “Religion” of the Minority Versus the “Culture” of the Majority’, *Journal of Law and Religion* 28, no. 1 (2013): 67–104.

69 Willem Frijhoff, ‘Toe-eigening als vorm van culturele dynamiek’, *Volkscunde* 104 (2003): 1–17.

Cultural historian Willem Frijhoff has likened heritage to a buoy that anchors the present to events and places in a real historical past. Yet, as it is jostled by the waves of memory, culture and politics, heritage drifts far from this anchor. In other words, heritage is constructed and subject to competition and negotiation.⁶⁹ This means that although critical research can uncover neglected or suppressed histories that can help minority communities create public space for their heritage or enter into the imagined “national” heritage, these developments are not being solely or even largely driven by the scholarly quest for more accurate understandings of historical reality. This would be to confuse the buoy with the anchor. Thus, the reason why the diversification of heritage has become a ‘best practice’ for heritage organisations is, I would argue, not because this will provide society with a more accurate depiction of its history. Rather, it is because a diverse society requires a diverse heritage.

Activity

YUSUF-JOSEF, ABRAHAM-IBRAHIM, AYOUB-JOB

Overview of the activity

The idea of the activity is to connect religious 'heritage' to personal values in order to build bridges between religious cultures. We focus on the Judaic religions, but this activity can easily be translated to work with other religions.

This activity starts with asking the participants to read a story from the Bible, Torah or the Quran. We selected three stories that exist in all books, in more or less the same version. These are the following stories:

Jozef/Yusuf ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_\(Genesis\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_(Genesis)))

Job/Ayoub (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Job)

Abraham/Ibrahim (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham>)

Objectives

The objective of this activity is to work around similarities in religious heritage in order to stress these similarities instead of stressing the differences.

Minimum knowledge requirements from participants

Some religious knowledge might be required.

Duration

- *Take at least 60 minutes for this exercise, but it is up to the facilitator to decide how deep to go.*

Minimum / maximum number of participants

- Recommended: n/a
- Minimum: 4
- Maximum: n/a

Materials needed

Prints of the stories you want to work with, preferably from all the books.

Room/space requirements

Enough space to make circles of chairs of three or four people.



Preparation

You have to prepare yourself properly by reading and understanding the stories you want to work with. It might be useful to talk to a religious 'leader' about these stories before, to gain a deeper insight.

Instructions

1. Make groups of four participants (three is also possible). Make a good mix between religious backgrounds if possible.
2. Give the groups the stories you picked, preferably in a version from the Quran and from the Bible, and if needed also the Torah.
3. Ask the groups to read the story you picked. One person can read it out loud.
4. Invite one of the participants to reflect on the story they just listened to. You can use the following questions
 - a. What touches you in this story and why?
 - b. What is the meaning of the story according to you?
 - c. What do you think the meaning of the story is to others?
 - d. What values does this story contain for you?
 - e. Do you think this story is still topical, or is it truly heritage?
5. Then invite the other participants to react.
6. Repeat this with the other participants. If a good discussion starts, let it happen.
7. Ask the participants to make a collective document, writing down the shared values. You can use a big sheet/poster for this and put all posters next to each other at the end of the activity.

Learning outcomes evidences to be collected

The documents with shared values.

Evaluation

At the end of this activity you do a debriefing with the entire group. You can use the posters that were created as the last step of the activity. You can ask the following questions:

How was it to talk about things that are important to you?

What did you learn from the stories of others?

What did you most appreciate in the stories you heard?

Which touched you most in the stories you listened to?

What did you learn about your own religious 'heritage'?

Are you looking differently to other religions and people practising other religions now?

One of the dynamics of this exercise is to get people from religious opinions (or even dogmas) to personal stories of belief, revealing that many aspects in different religions are based on the same values, and often come from the same source. If you feel a true understanding in the group, you might even point out that we also use stories to stress the differences, instead of using the rooted stories that are often not so different in the end.

When you have finished this activity, ask yourself if the group has been able to come to this awareness. Did you build a proper foundation enabling behavioural change amongst the participants?

Teaching tips, stories and experiences during piloting

Often the groups have to work on their own as you might not have enough facilitators to join every group. In that case, take care that the groups follow the structure. For example, by handing out a short instruction on paper, with some concrete questions to ask, like:

- o *What touches you in this story and why?*
- o *What is the meaning of the story according to you?*
- o *What do you think the meaning of the story is to others?*
- o *What values does this story contain for you?*
- o *Do you think this story is still topical, or is it truly heritage?*

Questions for self-reflection in the teaching practice

What is your religious origin? In what way is religion and/or secularity present in your teaching practice? Does your own view on religion have an impact on the learning space? Do you factor in the religious diversity of learners when planning a training?