

Report on the online conference

“Religious Materials: Emic Perspectives - Etic Constructions - Museum Classifications”

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“Religious Materials: Emic Perspectives - Etic Constructions - Museum Classifications” was the final conference of the interdisciplinary research network *Dynamics of Religious Things in Museums* (REDIM), which has existed since 2018 and is funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. The conference aimed to present the research findings of the REDIM network to both the international specialist community and interested members of the public, and to put those findings up for discussion. The overarching aim was to create a forum for a broader international and interdisciplinary exchange on the multi-layered topic of religious objects in museums. REDIM’s work addresses material culture, a topic that has been of increasing interest to academia, as well as being relevant to the current public debate about the history and handling of objects in ethnographic museums in the global north. With its focus on religious objects, the network brings a particular viewpoint to this debate. Originally planned as a face-to-face event, the conference was ultimately held in an online digital format due to the pandemic. It was perhaps for this very reason that it was able to live up to its claim of constructively contributing to the debate in a way that was both international and sustainable.

The conference was opened by REDIM’s spokesperson, Prof. Edith Franke. This was followed by a welcome address by Prof. Michael Bölker, Vice President for Research and International Affairs at the Philipps-University Marburg, and Prof. Claus-Dieter Osthövener from the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Religion (ZIR), where the REDIM project is based. The speakers emphasised the importance of international exchange, and the relevance of looking at material objects in religious studies and religion-related research.

Prof. Beinhauer-Köhler, project manager at REDIM, then welcomed Prof. Sonia Hazard from the Department of Religion at Florida State University, who gave the first keynote address. Prof. Hazard's work has a range of foci: religion in the early history of the American states, material texts and the history of the book, material, visual and sensory culture, and the developments of evangelicalism in the period before the American Civil War. In terms of theory and methodology, she focuses particularly on the approaches of new materialism.

In her lecture, “The case of the ‘gold plates’: How ordinary material objects sparked a religious revolution”, Prof. Hazard explored the question of whether Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, had really found golden plates. She shed new light on the question of the plates – the central material artefacts of America's most famous indigenous religion – from the perspectives of new materialism and actor-network theory.

Hazard concluded that Smith (and possibly a group of witnesses) may have had a formative physical experience with a set of tablets, an encounter that was partly responsible for the development of Mormonism. These plates may have been either stereotype plates or copper plates, which were commonly used for the industrial printing of books in the United States in the 19th century. Hazard also

¹ Many thanks to Mirko Roth and Caroline Widmer for their contribution to the report on panels III and IV.

used her historical research as a basis for investigating the theoretical implications for religious studies of extending the concept of agency to non-human actors. To this end, she referred to emic theories of religious traditions that assume forces that go beyond the human, and showed how these can be adapted for academic conceptions.

In the discussion that followed, the topics addressed included the importance of objects in research without research subjects/interlocutors, possible future exhibitions of Mormon objects in museums, and the role of emic perspectives in material realities. These broad topics provided a framework within which the panellists from Austria, Brazil, Germany, Ghana, Iran, the Netherlands, Russia and Switzerland could contribute to the discussion.

The second day of the conference began with Panel I: “Religion in the museum. Making the invisible visible”. The panel was moderated by Dr Ramona Jelinek-Menke, REDIM’s academic coordinator and a post-doctoral researcher in religious studies at the Philipps-University Marburg. The panel contributions dealt mainly with the current handling of objects and rituals in museums. They focussed on the different interpretations of these, and the way in which the distinction between emic and etic perspectives is increasingly blurred, thus becoming a topic increasingly ripe for academic investigation.

The contribution of Elena Romashko explained how religious artefacts are used to tell the story of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the subsequent radioactive contamination. Using the material religion approach, she explored the experiences of people confronted with contamination in Belarus and Ukraine after the nuclear disaster.

Prof. Peter Bräunlein presented his reflections on what he sees as newly invented museum rituals, which have developed in the course of postcolonial self-questioning and the opening of museums to a ritualised approach to objects.

Dr Mirko Roth presented the concept of “sensescape” for museum design and explored the question of what distinguishes sensescapes in museums in particular, and what role religious objects play in them.

Dr Dagmar Schweitzer de Palacios’ talk covered the case of the *tõ-mombú*, a ritual fighting club of the Aché, a formerly nomadic ethnic group in Paraguay. She explained how, as in this example, the complex meaning of objects in ethnographic collections can be concealed behind an unpretentious exterior.

The concluding discussion included reflections on the culture of memory in museums, as well as the linking of memory culture with political interests. Another discussion revolved around the danger of turning ‘living objects’, which are linked to rich knowledge in their context of origin, into ‘dead objects’, by exhibiting them in museums without sufficient background information. The link between materiality and visibility was examined, especially with regard to museums where one is allowed look at the things on display, but not touch them.

Panel II, “Meaning-making. Collecting and collections”, was chaired by Prof. Bärbel Beinhauer Köhler, Professor of History of Religions at the Philipps-University Marburg and project manager at REDIM. The panel dealt with the topic of museums founded or run by religious communities, collecting and collections as practices, as well as academic research on the museum as a religious place.

Tatjana Hering shared her perspective on the Hacı-Bektaş Museum in Turkey. This is a building complex that was originally built in the 13th century as a dervish hut. Although the space has been redesigned, the unique historical background of the former hut still shapes the museum dynamic today.

Dr Sara Kuehn researched the 'Sufi Museum' opened by the Inayati community, a religious community of the mystical Sufi denomination of Islam. She brought to the panel her insights into religious traditions in the private museum context.

Karolina Lisowski shared her experiences of art education at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. Art education uses the objects on display as an anchor point to tell stories associated with them, often involving the senses and bodies of the participants.

Dr Ali Shahidi is currently researching an Ottoman genealogical chart from the Religious Studies Collection of the Philipps-University Marburg. He presented his findings on spiritual inheritance in Islamic Sufism, and the concept of *Silsila* (dynasty or chain) in genealogical scrolls.

In the discussion at the end of the panel, the use of certain terms was addressed. Terms carry with them the baggage of meaning - and in some cases the ambiguity of multiple meanings. As a result, it is particularly important to choose them very consciously and carefully in knowledge transfer processes. The intention to do justice to the objects, their contexts of origin, and their use should be at the centre of this. There was also some discussion on the role of institutions that hold power over both the form of exhibitions and the fundamental question of whether objects get displayed or hidden in storage.

In a public lecture entitled "Curtain up! Insights into the three participating museums", the museums involved in the REDIM project presented themselves in short videos, and provided insights into their current exhibitions. In the discussion that followed with the curators, the diversity of perspectives and approaches became clear. The exhibition styles and conceptual bases of museums were critically examined, and references to the colonial era addressed. Against the backdrop of current public debates, it became clear that museum history and exhibition practices need to be reflected upon closely with regard to their colonial entanglements. The 'right way' to deal with exhibition objects from colonial contexts remains an open question, and one that will continue to occupy academia.

This lecture was followed by a round-table discussion entitled "Challenges, Processes and Findings in the Research of Religious Things in the Museum". The format enabled both the participants and members of the public to get an overview of the research processes within REDIM's various working areas, as well as those of the individual doctoral theses that are being produced within the framework of REDIM. The idea of enrichment through regular exchange within the project network was especially emphasised. Some REDIM staff members described the particular challenges of researching during a pandemic.

The planned keynote speech "RE:ANIMA - when objects in the museum come to life", by Nanette J. Snoep, Director of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne, unfortunately had to be cancelled.

Panel III, "Religious Objects as the plaything of hegemonic actors", took place on the last day, and was chaired by Dr Caroline Widmer, lecturer at the Institute for Religious Studies at the University of Zurich and curator of Indian painting at the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. The panel contributions dealt with questions of religious objects, hegemonic actors, and hegemonic interests.

Dr Simon Kofi Appiah presented a theoretical perspective arguing for a southern epistemology. He proposed the methodology of "liminal ethnography", as well as arguing for the use of Raimon Panikkar's term 'cosmotheandricism' as a means of including emic perspectives in the reconstruction of knowledge.

Dr Patricia Rodrigues de Souza provided an insight into emic perspectives on indigenous holdings in Western museums by documenting the journey of a young Tupinambá girl who, in a European museum, rediscovered objects from her culture from pre-colonial times.

In the last contribution to this panel, Dr Susanne Rodemeier demonstrated how provenance research, as part of the daily practice of museums, enriches knowledge about objects. She explained how highlighting the negotiations around the objects' provenances could be made part of exhibition practice.

As diverse as the contributions were, the common conclusion was that the classification of things in museums into 'art' or 'objects' only reflects part of the history of humanity. Museum objects are part of a narrative linked to a Western-initiated process of turning artefacts into objects, and thereby removing them from their previous contexts. In a decolonialised world, the perspectives of the makers and the people and communities who once owned or used the objects, as well as theories from the global south, must be included in the research and museum presentation of objects, to do justice to their polysemy.

Panel IV, "Art-ifacts between classifications", was chaired by Dr Mirko Roth, a postdoctoral researcher within the Department of History of Religion at the Philipps-University Marburg. The panel focused on the phenomenon that religious artefacts are often declared as 'art' in museums.

In his lecture, Ferdinand Liefert presented the Japanese adaptation of the European basic pattern of museological distinctions, creating a division into ethnological museums (*Hakubutsukan*) on the one hand and art museums (*Bijutsukan*) on the other.

In her presentation, Prof. Christa Frateantonio made the case for religious materials to be identified as such in museums, rather than following the path of the Africa Museum (Tervuren, Belgium) in declaring such materials to be "unrivaled art".

Prof. Ekaterina Teryukova described the collections of the sinologist V.M. Alekseev, who, at the beginning of the 20th century, brought large numbers of woodblock prints along with other images with religious content back from China to Russia, as a basis for academic research into Chinese folkloric iconography.

It became clear in this panel that the approach of labelling religious objects as 'art' seems to be a widespread phenomenon within museums. It also became clear that a thing is never something in and of itself, but always only a thing 'for us' as a relational object. It is thus within the power of exhibition houses to be able to substantially change the object status of a thing (in the course of its object biography) through musealisation. However, it was not possible to clarify in detail which religious-political discourses of power lie behind this procedure.

Prof. Edith Franke, REDIM spokesperson, gave the closing address. She emphasised the need to embed academic research in international contexts, and to include different, interdisciplinary perspectives to further develop cultural science disciplines. She also pointed out that many of the questions raised could not be conclusively discussed or answered within the framework of a single conference, nor within the framework of the REDIM project, but should form inspiration for further work. She emphasised that regular discussions and critical questioning of the handling of religious objects in museum exhibitions are important for a reflexive science.

In accordance with the conference concept, the panellists submitted their presentations in advance, in the form of 20-minute videos. These were then made available to all participants two weeks before the conference. A comment function offered the opportunity to discuss the contributions in writing.

In the panels during the conference, the individual presentations were each briefly summarised and intensively discussed.

With regard to the conference format, it can be concluded that a digital conference offered many advantages: the pre-recorded inputs made it possible to prepare intensively for the conference and the individual panels, creating an extremely fruitful discussion space. Also, as the prior distribution of the presentation videos had enabled individual comprehension questions to be answered in advance, discussion during the conference itself could be focussed entirely on matters of content, right from the start. During the conference, the use of a mixture of different formats – including panels, round-table discussions, keynotes, videos, and virtual meeting rooms for informal exchange – provided a sense of variety, counteracting the physical rigidity of isolation in front of a screen at home. In addition, the digital implementation made the conference accessible to a greater range of participants, as travel and accommodation costs, as well as bureaucratic barriers to entering the country, were eliminated. It was also possible to admit an unlimited passive audience, as this created no additional costs, and there was no conference venue to become overcrowded. Further positive aspects included the ability to keep a permanent record of the presentations and discussions, and the fact that the open comment function allowed for continued exchange after the conference.

Overall, the REDIM final conference was a successful international conference. The exchange and discussion between university professors, academic staff and museum employees were found to be fruitful and enriching. In addition, the conference gave students and other interested parties an insight into the complexity of researching religious objects in museums.