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Negotiating Religion in Museums

1 Introduction: Challenges of Religion in Museums

The research network REDIM examines the interactions and relationships of religious things in collections, exhibitions and museums. Our research focuses on the shifting function and meaning of religious things, through the twin processes of decontextualisation and recontextualisation in the museum setting. By using the term religious ‘things’, we follow a broad understanding of Houtman and Meyer, who see facets of material religion not only in images and objects, but also in bodies, spaces and technologies.¹ This approach is based on an understanding of religion, in which material testimonies are part of communication systems through which religious meanings and communities are constituted, instead of reducing them solely to carriers of information and supplements to written sources.²

This understanding has two consequences: Firstly, the scope of the material culture of religion – and thereby academic perspectives thereon – is considerably broadened, to include, for example, soundscapes, electronic recitation devices, or the choreography of rituals. Secondly, the arrangement and orchestration of such a range of objects in museums can enable sensory access to religions. Accordingly, an analysis of the dynamics of religious things in museums is directed not only at a broad spectrum of objects, but also at their relationality, the interaction with them, and the intention and reception of their staging. For things that have been included in the museum, we use the more specific term ‘objects’ or its synonym ‘artefacts’. This is to indicate a new status of things as musealised objects, which are now placed in a different network of social relations.

Alongside exhibiting objects, museums commonly communicate through arrangements and staging, combined with various media such as texts, video recordings, sound installations or performances. The exhibitions not only bear the

1 Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, “Introduction: Material Religion – How Things Matter,” in *Things: Religion and the Question of Materiality*, ed. Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 17.

2 Peter J. Bräunlein, “Material Turn,” in *Dinge des Wissens: Die Sammlungen, Museen und Gärten der Universität Göttingen*, ed. Georg-August-Universität Göttingen (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2012), 34–38.

signature of the curator, but also express existing orders of knowledge, and follow specific intentions as to what visitors should learn about religion. Museums, to which Kohl ascribes the status of “cult sites of modernity”,³ are thus not only places of preservation and display. They are also, and to a large extent, spaces in which controversial interpretations, varying identifications and discussions about religion rightly occur;⁴ spaces which Clifford fittingly described as “contact zones”.⁵ Therefore, we focus on the social practices associated with objects and the actors in this field: not only those working in the museum, but also collectors and donors of objects and, last but not least, the visitors and the objects themselves. We will explore the challenges that arise from collecting, preserving, presenting and receiving religious objects and religion, considering the following:

Classification: Under which circumstances is an object perceived as religious, and to which religion is it assigned? Who determines, and on what grounds, the criteria for whether an object is understood as religious or non-religious? When deciding on the acquisition, what is perceived or understood to be religious is crucial, as it is the knowledge systems (here the understanding of religion) of curators and museum directors that determine whether an object is even understood as ‘religious’, and then into which of the systematic categories of the inventory catalogues it is subsequently classified. Is a Javanese shadow puppet a religious object and if so, to which religion does it belong?

Handling: To what extent can the original context of an object be taken into account, and, indeed, to what extent should it? In this regard, do museums have to follow religious rules? The process of musealisation is generally understood as an act of secularisation and decontextualisation.⁶ Objects considered holy by believers are removed from their previous religious meaning or ritual use: They are decontextualised, classified according to secular knowledge systems and museum taxonomies, and handled according to conservation requirements. Religious meanings are neglected, whether consciously or unconsciously. What does this entail for the semantic content and the possibilities of perception of an object,

3 Karl-Heinz Kohl, *Die Macht der Dinge: Geschichte und Theorie sakraler Objekte* (München: Beck, 2003), 253.

4 Anke te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2012), 149–88, 184–97.

5 James Clifford, “Museums, Contact Zones and the Internet,” *Archives & Museum Informatics* (1997): 59–66, 192; Joachim Baur, “Was ist ein Museum?,” in *Museumsanalyse: Methoden und Konturen eines neuen Forschungsfeldes*, ed. Joachim Baur (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2010), 41.

6 Krzysztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums: Vom Sammeln* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2013), 84; te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums zur Einführung*, 106, 119 and Kohl, *Die Macht der Dinge*, 231, 253–60.

such as an ancient Egyptian coffin, which was meant for eternal rest after death, and is now exhibited in a museum?

Potential for interpretation: What potential for deconstruction and reconstruction of religion do museum presentations entail? Decontextualising objects by including them in a museum is, at the same time, a process of *recontextualisation*: objects are not only categorised according to museum classifications, and thus to particular religious traditions, they are also placed in a new context of meaning within an exhibition. The context in which an object is presented, and what is communicated as religion, is a highly dynamic matter. What does it imply when a Javanese Wayang figure is displayed within an exhibition on Hindu myths, or on leather craftsmanship, or on the religious diversity of Islam? What are the consequences of exhibiting the cult of a deviant saint in a Department of Christianity?

We understand the process of musealisation – i.e. the collection, classification, categorisation and also the exhibition of religious artefacts, as well as an analysis in the field of the study of religion – as a form of secularisation, since in both cases a distanced, reflective meta-level is taken up.⁷ Both aim to show the complexity of religious ideas and practices, and to make knowledge accessible, in order to open spaces for a discursive dialogue on what constitutes religion. But museums go beyond this shared basis; by exhibiting religious objects they also create spaces for experience and learning that invite reinterpretation and individual reconstruction of religion.⁸ Museums and collections are not places of mere illustrations or distanced descriptions of religions – they intervene explicitly, and in a positioning manner, in the field of ‘religion’, although they certainly offer space for an analytically reflective examination of the topic of religion.

We propose that musealised objects have a special potential to challenge the academic and social perception of religion in two ways: 1. The preservation of religious objects in museums reflects systems of knowledge, while also challenging knowledge about the history of religion. 2. The staging of religious objects in an exhibition opens up possibilities of deconstruction and reconstruction of religion, as well as a spectrum for (re)interpretation and negotiation of religious ideas.

We explore this thesis through selected objects and exhibition arrangements in the Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung) and discuss, from the

7 Te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums zur Einführung* and Kohl, *Die Macht der Dinge*.

8 Te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums zur Einführung* 174, 185 and Juan Gonçalves, “The ‘Liquid Museum’: A Relational Museum that Seeks to Adapt to Today’s Society,” *The Museum Review* 4, no. 1 (2019), http://articles.themuseumreview.org/tmr_vol4no1_goncalves.

perspective of the study of religion, various factors and problems arising from the handling of objects classified as religious.

2 The Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung) in the Context of Discourses in the Study of Religion and on Museums

The Museum of Religions at Philipps-University Marburg is one of the few museums worldwide that is specifically dedicated to religious objects, while centring its conception on the subject of religion. Even more notably, the museum is rare for its explicit focus on the diversity of religious cultures, and an explicitly comparative perspective on religion. Further examples of museums of this kind include the Museum of the History of Religion in St Petersburg, the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art in Glasgow, the Museum of World Religions in Taipei, and the Museum Religio in Olpe. Similarly, research on religion and religious things in museums is still relatively limited, although in recent years an increasing number of publications have been issued.⁹

The Protestant theologian and phenomenologist of religion Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) founded the Museum of Religions in 1927. The earliest items were sourced through being specifically purchased, made on commission, collected during travels, or donated to the collection. The focus was not so much on the artistic or historical qualities or uniqueness of these objects, but rather Otto aimed to create a collection from which visitors could learn about ‘other religions’.

Otto’s fascination with the manifold manifestations of ‘the holy’, which he observed in these objects and writings, as well as in religious practice, pervaded his academic work, most notably in his book *Das Heilige* (1917).¹⁰ Otto established the concept of the *numinous*, a profound emotional experience, forming the es-

9 Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013); Crispin Paine, ed., *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* (London: Leicester Univ. Press, 2000); Ekaterina Teryukova, “Collecting and Research in the Museums of the History of Religion,” in *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Gretchen Buggeln et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 147–53; Peter J. Bräunlein, *Religion und Museum* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2004); Susanne Claußen, *Anschaungssache Religion: Zur musealen Repräsentation religiöser Artefakte* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009) and Konstanze Runge, “Studying, Teaching, and Exhibiting Religion: The Marburg Museum of Religions,” in *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Gretchen Buggeln et al. (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 155–62.

10 Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Breslau: Trewendt & Granier, 1917).

sence of religion, which could be encountered by viewing and interacting with religious items or practices.

During this period, material religion played a rather insignificant role in the theoretical developments in the field of the study of religion. Early scholars of the study of religion adopted philosophical-historical methods which classified religious traditions based on scriptural sources. Non-written religious traditions, folk beliefs or popular religions were deemed inferior, and thus widely excluded from academic definitions and research.¹¹ According to Bräunlein, the material aspects of religion, in particular, had not only gone unnoticed, but had even been devalued, due to the inherent cultural-historical dichotomy of mind and matter. With the emerging 'cultural turn' in the study of religion, that has taken place since the 1980s, more recent approaches seek to grasp religion in its empirical, lived and practised forms, and in its materiality. Thus, research proceeds from an understanding of religion that has to be discursively clarified.¹² Here, in a 'materialised' approach to religion, categories of body (including sensory perception), things, places and practices are analysed in relation to each other and within religious discourses. Materiality is therefore understood to be intrinsic to the social reality of religion.¹³

These cultural and material turns are also reflected in the development of the Museum of Religions. As early as the 1960s and 1970s, under the direction of Martin Kraatz, a historical-critical, contextualising and empirically based approach to the study of religion was established within the collection. This was followed by Peter Bräunlein, who placed emphasis on museum theory and popular religious culture. Since the start of Edith Franke's directorship over the collection in 2006, the exhibition focus has been on specific aspects of religious life, with emphasis on the socio-historical contextualisation and dynamics of religion, from the perspective of the comparative study of religion. Exhibitions such as "From Dervish Cap to Mecca-Cola: Diversity of Islamic Faith Practice" (2013)¹⁴, and "There is No God! Church and Religion in Soviet posters" (2015) show not only historical objects, but also contemporary everyday things. Their topics and conceptions also

11 Peter J. Bräunlein, "Ausstellungen und Museen," in *Praktische Religionswissenschaft: Eine Einführung*, ed. Michael Klöcker (Köln: Böhlau, 2008), 162.

12 Gavin Flood, "Reflections on Tradition and Inquiry in the Study of Religions," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 74, no. 1 (March 2006): 47–58, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfj012> and Frank Neubert, *Die diskursive Konstitution von Religion* (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2016), 185–89.

13 Sonia Hazard, "The Material Turn in the Study of Religion," *Religion and Society. Advances in Research*, no. 4 (2013).

14 Edith Franke and Konstanze Runge, eds., *Von Derwisch-Mütze bis Mekka-Cola: Vielfalt islamischer Glaubenspraxis* (Marburg: Diagonal-Verl., 2013).

reflect current discourses in the study of religion on intra-religious diversity, including processes of individualisation and secularisation of religion. Uniquely for a museum, the collection is also a teaching collection whilst simultaneously being integrated into research.

3 Authenticity, Provocation, Differentiation, and Innovation: Examples of Dynamics of Religious Objects in Museums

In museums, social, academic and museological discourses coincide with the activities and perspectives of various actors. These all influence the way in which objects are handled – not only how objects are placed within the order of the museum, but also how they are displayed and arranged, and how they are ultimately perceived and received. Here, academic approaches encounter a subject that is usually highly emotionally charged, and therefore often left unquestioned or unchallenged in everyday conversations or language. The confrontation with religious objects evokes a wide variety of reactions from visitors, as attested to in our guestbooks. These reactions range from surprise, fascination, outrage and anger, to feelings of awe, or even reflection on their own beliefs.

When a new item enters a museum collection, a decision is made as to whether the object in question is something religious that is ‘worthy’ of acquisition or preservation. Subsequently, an object number is assigned, and the object is classified within museum taxonomies, and thus within the underlying knowledge orders. This museal organising is a communicative practice, in which collections generate meaning through their systems of classification.¹⁵ This becomes apparent, for example, in the dissolution or differentiation of classifications such as ‘superstition/folk belief’: Historically, this categorisation was used as a demarcation from ‘religion’, under a conception defining religion primarily as constituting those of scripture or revelation.¹⁶ We will explore material religion and musealisation through analysis of four particular examples, showing the reflection and revision of orders of knowledge, as well as the reconstruction of religion in museums.

15 Gottfried Korff, “Einleitung: Notizen zur Dingbedeutsamkeit”, in *13 Dinge: Form, Funktion, Bedeutung*, ed. Gottfried Korff (Stuttgart: Württembergisches Landesmuseum, 1992), –17 and Bräunlein, “Material Turn,” 38.

16 See footnote 13.

3.1 Authenticity: An Imperfect Ancient Egyptian Coffin

In 1927, Rudolf Otto acquired an Egyptian coffin for the newly founded Marburg Museum of Religions. Since then, its colourful illustrations, with depictions of the mummification process, have fascinated many visitors, but have repeatedly raised doubts regarding the object's authenticity. However, it is indeed a rare original. The coffin of Iba, as the buried person is called, originates from el-Hibeh (Middle Egypt) and dates to around the 6th century BC. The illustrations provide information on one of the most significant rituals in Ancient Egypt, on the order of gods involved and on concepts of life after death. No information has been found on the whereabouts of the mummy, whose eternity is supposed to be ritually represented and ensured by the coffin. It was not until 2016 that the object was first subjected to proper study, by Egyptologist Gessler-Löhr, leading to its visual language being deciphered.¹⁷ The portrayal of mummification is highly intriguing, not only for historians and Egyptologists, but also for visitors interested in religious history. The illustrations visible on the coffin have some unusual features. For example, some commonly depicted elements are missing entirely, such as the fourth urn, while missing limbs were added to one figure at a later date. Gessler-Löhr proposes that the craftsmen, due to a lack of experience, made repeated mistakes when transferring the motif from an existing template, being unable to adequately estimate the space available. Indications as to the identity of the deceased allow speculation that Iba descended from a family of priests, whose duties included the execution of such burial rites. This creates another, different perspective in the museum: alongside the mythology and gods of Ancient Egypt, the activities and everyday practices of craftsmen and priests come to the forefront.

This valuable and rare object holds a strong appeal for visitors. Its fascination may lie in the permanence of its materiality, in the radiance and brilliance of the colours, as well as in the age of the object. This imperfect coffin demonstrates, on one hand, that the fragmentation of museum objects creates challenges for research and interpretation and, on the other hand, that their authenticity creates an aura of sacredness.¹⁸ This is supported by the staging within the exhibition. The special UV-free lighting makes the gold particularly shine, and the simple functionality of the modern air-conditioned vitrine reinforces a distanced, almost

17 Beatrix Gessler-Löhr, "EWIGE UN-RUHE. Der Marburger Mumiensarg als Bildkompendium zu Mumifizierung, Totenglauben und Jenseitsvorstellungen im alten Ägypten," in *Objekte erzählen Religionsgeschichte(n)*, ed. Edith Franke (Marburg, 2017), 190–220.

18 Te Heesen, *Theorien des Museums zur Einführung*, 106, 122–24 and Kohl, *Die Macht der Dinge*, 9, 233, 256f.



Figure 1: Ancient Egyptian coffin, ca. 550–450 B.C. Photo: Georg Dörr, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Philipps-Universität Marburg (Bh 001a+b).

reverent way of dealing with, and approaching, an antique and seemingly foreign object.

The newly discovered Egyptian and religious-historical significance of this precious item led to its conservational presentation, thanks to a private sponsor who became fascinated by it. Furthermore, the curators initiated additional research on the colonial interrelationships involved in the acquisition of this object.

3.2 Provocation: A Bearded Woman on a Cross

In its early days, the directors of the collection focused their activities primarily on so-called ‘other’ or ‘foreign’ – meaning non-Christian – religions. Consequently, relatively few Christian objects are present in the collection. In a single room, some lesser known and global aspects of the Christian religion, such as a Japanese fumie¹⁹ or a newly invented Protestant prayer bracelet (“Pearls of Faith”) are presented. Of the 72 Christian objects currently on display, 12 are variants of the motif of Kümmernis – also known as Liberata, Vilgeförtis (or Wilgeförtis), or St Uncumber, depending on the region.

According to the legends found in texts from the early 16th century, the young woman was a ‘pagan’ princess who had converted to Christianity. When her father tried to force her to marry, she refused and prayed for a way out. God answered her plea, and she grew a beard. Her enraged father ordered her to be crucified.²⁰ Her legend and veneration spread steadily from Flanders to southern Germany, from the early 15th century on, and, in the 16th century, she was briefly included in the Roman Martyrs’ Register. As a saint who was called upon in times of sorrow and adversity, there were numerous periods of strong devotion to Kümmernis. Numerous pictorial representations, sculptures, votive images and prayer cards attest to her popularity and widespread appeal in various regions of medieval Europe. She was, however, increasingly forgotten in the 19th century.²¹

19 A fumie (“stepping-on picture”) is a likeness of Jesus, onto which Japanese suspected Christians had to step, in order to prove that they were not members of that – from the 17th till the 19th century – outlawed religion. Kevin J. Wetmore, “Missionaries, Martyrs, and Madmen: The Christian as Outsider on the Modern Japanese Stage,” *Baylor Journal of Theatre and Performance* 4, no. 2 (2007): 57–70.

20 Martin Kraatz, “Die heilige Kümmernis und ihre Erforschung zwischen Legende und Wirklichkeit,” in *Am Kreuz – eine Frau: Anfänge – Abhängigkeiten – Aktualisierungen*, ed. Sigrid Glockzin-Bever and Martin Kraatz (Münster: LIT, 2003), 10, 12–14.

21 Martin Kraatz, “Die heilige Kümmernis und ihre Erforschung zwischen Legende und Wirklichkeit,” 15, 18.



Figure 2: Images of Kümmernis/Wilgefertis. Photo: Anna Matter, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Philipps-Universität Marburg (B-Ea 76, 78–80, 162, 163, 170–172).

Since 1981, various originals and reproductions of this motif have been exhibited. They originate from different periods and regions, and include related variants such as the Christus triumphans. The Kümmernis collection is therefore a historical testimony of deviant, non-conformist and lesser-known Christian movements. The museum's current extensive archive of Kümmernis depictions was formally established in 2010.

The depictions of Kümmernis are often a stimulus or catalyst for new interpretations of Christian ideas.²² Feminist and LGBTQ+ movements embrace her as a powerful symbol. The Swedish performance studio Vilgefertis, for example, equips “women and other people”²³ with beards at pride parades. Our exhibition provokes frequent questions, and some visitors even express irritation at the depiction. This didactic opportunity, of confrontation with iconography of a previously unknown and unexpected Christian figure, is made fruitful in guided

22 Alison Jasper, “Theology and the Freak Show: St Uncumber and the Discourse of Liberation,” *Theology & Sexuality* 11, no. 2 (2005): 51.

23 Heide Lunabba, “Studio Vilgefertis,” accessed December 12, 2020, <https://www.heidilunabba.com/studio-vilgefertis>.

tours, as a cue to reflect on one's initial understanding of Christianity. The museum thus proves to be not only a place for the preservation of documents of a religious tradition that might otherwise have been forgotten, but also a space for interpretation. In showing provocative objects, it provides an opportunity for revision of knowledge about the history of religion, and for new religious reinterpretation. The museum can thus become a place of negotiation around the plausibility, scope and acceptance of religious ideas. This arrangement of objects also highlights the role of museums as inevitably political spaces, since it is up to the curators to decide what is presented as part of religious traditions – and what is not.

3.3 Differentiation:

A Javanese Shadow Puppet in an Exhibition on Islam

The shadow puppet Semar is an item which, when viewed individually, is not immediately recognisable as religious. In the context of the history of South-east Asian religion, however, Semar is identified as an important figure in the Javanese shadow theatre Wayang. In the theatre's performances of Hindu epics, Semar is considered the most revered of the group of the Punakawan, the clowns and helpers who mediate between the world of gods and the world of humans. At the same time, according to Javanese mythology, he represents the highest divinity.²⁴ The classification of the object in the museum category Ar (A = local religion, r = Indonesia) is therefore both accurate and, simultaneously, incomplete. There are several arguments in favour of classifying Semar in the object group of Hindu mythology, or alternatively to



Figure 3: Wayang figure Semar, Java (Indonesia). Photo: Georg Dörr, © Religionskundliche Sammlung Philipps-Universität Marburg (Ar 089).

²⁴ Edith Franke, "The Religious Language of Objects: What Semar Says about the Religious Culture of Java," in *Materiality in Religion and Culture*, ed. Saburo Shawn Morishita (Berlin: Lit.Verlag, 2017), 113, 120f.

label it as part of Islam in Indonesia, as Semar plays a central role in mystically influenced Islam on Java, and is even called “tangible Allah”.²⁵ With the staging of the puppet in an exhibition on Islam²⁶, the object is, after its decontextualisation from its original location, now able to spark a reflection and reconstruction of what visitors understand as Islam. Therefore, the museum presentations contribute to opening and differentiating the understanding of religion and Islam. This object could have been ignored as a non-religiously classified theatre puppet, or as an expression of a local religious tradition, when designing an exhibition on Islam. That Semar is being shown in an exhibition on the religious diversity of Islam is due to its inclusion in a museum of religions’ collection, and its classification according to research in the study of religion.

3.4 Innovation: Materiality of Religion Beyond the Archived Objects

From 2015 to 2018, the special exhibition *SinnRäume* (literally sense spaces) highlighted the plurality and individuality of contemporary religious practice in Germany. Organised and curated by students, and based on a number of case studies, different individuals with varied living circumstances, religious practices, and affiliations were displayed. The presentation of the selected material confronted visitors with a variety of worldviews within their own local neighbourhoods, which, despite the geographical proximity, could clearly differ from their own.

Here, material religion was not exhibited in the form of objects, but rather through the attempt to focus on religious everyday practices and self-understanding. In addition to direct quotations and photographs, multi-sensory exhibition elements were integrated, which also stimulated the auditory and olfactory senses.

Through empirical research, current, highly individual forms of religiosity were made visible in a museal space. The examples shown in the exhibition referred to interviews with family members from the Ahmadiyya, a Jewish student in her shared apartment, a Catholic priest living next to his church, an evangelical deacon anticipating the rapture, a young family of members of ISCON (Hare Krishna Movement), as well as individuals who considered themselves spiritual but not religious, or rejected any form of label. *SinnRäume* used an actor-centred approach that defined religion in a broad sense, through an emic view of the persons portrayed, without stylising them to be representative of particular

25 Franke, “The Religious Language of Objects: What Semar Says about the Religious Culture of Java,” 123.

26 Franke and Runge, *Von Derwisch-Mütze bis Mekka-Cola*.



Figure 4: Special exhibition “SinnRäume. Living Religiosity in Germany”, 2015–2018. Photo: Anna Matter.

religions. This approach aimed not to stage religion, but rather to reflect on the different understandings of religion, including both the perception of the visitors and academic discourse.

SinnRäume was mainly accessible through guided tours that included participatory elements, used to engage the visitors and make them take active roles in, for example, recognising similarities and differences between the religious models presented. This created lively discussion about interreligious dialogue and tolerance, and on questions of religious freedom. The exhibition concept did not explicitly aim to stimulate such discussions, however; the approach of the curators in the field of the study of religion centred on highlighting religious diversity.²⁷

27 Celica Fitz and Anna Matter, “SinnRäume – An exhibition on Contemporary Religion in Germany: Exhibition Practice as a Medium in Religious Studies,” *Journal of Religion, Film and Media*, no. 3 (2017): 37–51.

4 Conclusion

The relationship between religious things and museums is framed by the fact that, although the decontextualisation and fragmentation of objects in a museum is an act of secularisation, museum presentations, at the same time, initiate new contextualisation, and can therefore lead to a process of religionisation.²⁸ The people active in the museum process (researchers, curators, etc.) generate interpretations through the way in which objects are displayed in a museum space. They thereby create not only spaces for the acquisition of knowledge, but also new spaces of experience – for example possibilities of religious identification or new interpretations for the visitors.

With the examples given here, we aimed to show that both the academic and social perception of religion is challenged in various ways:

Knowledge of religion (here Islam and Christianity) is expanded and differentiated by the addition of new facets, for example, by making a local deity, who appears in popular shadow theatre performances of Hindu epics, recognisable as a component of the Islamic culture of Java – or by adding a non-conformist, forgotten variant to the spectrum of venerated Catholic saints.

The preservation and exhibition of religious objects in the secular space of the museum, such as the ancient Egyptian coffin with its distinctive images, enables an approach to unfamiliar religious practices and ideas. This offers new insight, both for academic research and for the viewer, such as a perspective on ideas of the afterlife in otherwise inaccessible cultures.

By looking at everyday religious practices, such as attending Wayang performances, the veneration of a heterodox saint, or individualised forms of lived religiosity, attention is drawn to the relevance of religious ideas and practices beyond religious dogmas.

To summarise: The presentation of religious diversity and of non-conformist, heterodox forms of religion encourages reflection on religious understanding, can dissolve normative limitations, and enables a revision of knowledge about the history of religions. Furthermore, the exhibition of religion in museums can contribute to social debates about the de- and reconstruction of religion. Such

28 Arvind-Pal S. Mandair and Markus Dressler, "Introduction: Modernity, Religion-Making, and the Post-Secular," in *Secularism and Religion-Making*, ed. Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal S. Mandair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–36.

exhibitions, as places of encounter with religions, assume a scientific and social relevance that should not be underestimated.

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