

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### FRAMING RELIGIOUS WORLD VIEWS IN MUSEUM PRESENTATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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While observing our daily environment we immediately discover that we are surrounded by various religious objects, areas and institutions, such as churches, temples, synagogues, mosques or even graveyards. Furthermore, we may see a cross with a necklace, a religious book or a garment with various religious and gender specific designs in the streets. Reflecting on these specific objects we find out that we do not treat them all in the same way; some demand more respect than others and, for example, cannot be seen or touched by everybody or at any time. Religious objects, along with an official ideology, can have a very personal meaning for believers. One may use items which obviously belong to a religion even if its user considers him/herself not to be a religious person.

If it is independent of individual associations connected with objects however, the effect of any religious item is very strong. This effect is used to strengthen the identity of a religious group. Religious symbols, however, embrace different aspects and levels of meaning. They also offer possibilities to provoke other people or groups while treating their religious symbols in a disrespectful way. Immediately, therefore, a religious symbol becomes a political one.

Museums, which have the responsibility to preserve cultural heritage, are one of the best examples for institutions which have to be aware of these different approaches to the same objects. For example, some historical museums or art museums are the heirs of the French Revolution, when the churches were rigidly "cleaned" of altars and statues of Saints. Collections in ethnographic museums embrace many religious items which survived the destructive process of missionaries.

Thus, today's museums are in a special position of keeping the balance between being a secular institution and moderating the special knowledge of formerly spiritually-loaded artifacts used in a religious environment. Furthermore, with the concept of participation and inclusion, museums



have recognized the opportunity to work through a relational approach (Rein 2011) and to integrate the religious experiences connected with the objects of their museum collection. I will discuss all these questions below.

### Religious Objects in Taxis

In 2006, anyone entering Arieh Perecowicz's taxi in Montréal (Peritz 2009) quickly knew what was close to the man's heart. At various places around the dashboard he had posted pictures of his family, religious artifacts, a couple of flags and a Remembrance Day poppy. In forty-four years of work these items never sparked a customer's complaint or interfered with his work, the sixty-five-year-old cabbie said, but they did provoke a series of eight tickets with a fine of about \$1,300 from Montréal's Taxi Bureau. The driver was asked to remove the offending items immediately "under a bylaw that bans any object or inscription that is not required for the taxi to be in service (religiouswatch.com n.d.)." This confrontation resulted in a court battle that tested the line between personal/private and public space. Furthermore, the extent to which a taxi might become a vehicle for personal and religious expressions arose. "I am secular but I have roots and a culture" the driver said. "These items mean something to me and that's why I've always had them in my car" (Peritz 2009).

These items include photos of the late Lubavitcher spiritual leader, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, and two *mezuzot*<sup>2</sup> affixed to the car frame between the front and the back door. It was not uncommon to see everything from air fresheners to rosary beads and crucifixes dangling from rear mirrors of taxis in Montréal, as well as family snaps on the dashboards.

In February 2011, having lost his case with the municipal court, Perecowicz planned to appeal the judge's ruling all the way to the Supreme Court. In the end, however, with the help of his lawyer an out-of-court settlement was reached with municipal authorities (religiouswatch.com n.d.) on March 24, 2011. The deal included specific written acknowledgement by the chief of the Montreal Taxi Bureau that religious objects are permissible in taxis as long as they do not constitute a safety hazard through proselytizing. The settlement became a landmark policy for more tolerance in the city allowing cab drivers to display religious objects in their taxis as long as they do not try to convince riders to convert.

However, this is not the whole story! Although it was seemingly a fight for religious freedom a very different issue served as the original source of the dispute. One article only mentioned that the driver in 2006:

got his first such ticket at Cavendish Mail two days after he gave a television interview criticizing the Taxi Bureau for not doing enough to crack down on the illegal transport of seniors by unlicensed cabbies (Ravensbergen 2011).

The conflict turns out to have started with a dispute about labor law conditions and the question of the responsibility of the Taxi Bureau regarding their official taxi drivers. This office, however, ignored the arguments and transferred this general demand into a different, individual problem which they seemed to have with Perecowicz. Now, it was the driver who was wrong. His selection of displayed artifacts was a mixture of personal objects with secular as well as religious meanings. While looking for any inherent potential for advocacy, the accused picked out the religious items as the focus for his future arguments against the intervention of the Taxi Bureau. Although the driver explained that he was a secular person, the case increasingly became a religious one.

For human-rights lawyer Abby Shawn, the fines from the Taxi Bureau were an issue of freedom of religious expression. According to him, this was the only case where a taxi bureau had requested a driver to remove his religious icons. Within a short time it turned into a fight for religious freedom in public spaces for everybody, which is a very explosive political issue in Canadian society. This focus on a religious argument immediately connected the driver with different groups of supporters such as: the Jewish community together with a Jewish lawyer; other religious communities which, as minorities, also felt suppressed by the government and by the law; and groups who were generally fighting against any form of discrimination according to religion, gender, age or race.

The subsequent transfer from a justified political postulation into a debate about the "right" place for a private collection of religious items in the public space of a taxi reflects a typical contemporary global situation. The two parties did not start to talk about critical working conditions but they "religionized" the discussion on both sides. Consequently, the demand by the Taxi Bureau for a "non-technical, object-cleaned" car was openly interpreted as being disrespectful against the Jewish religion and the religious community on the whole. The objects in the taxi "inspired a collective sentiment of respect [...] and had an absolute value for the members of their community" (Derlon n.d., 4).

### Taxis and/or Museums

Museums, especially ethnographic museums, are confronted in their daily work with increasing obligations to consider religion respectively to spell out please spiritual needs, concerns and responsibilities from different



perspectives. In the following, I will try to shed more light onto the categorization of artifacts as “religious,” “sacred” or “culturally sensitive” while comparing the collection and the decoration of Perecowicz’s taxi with a museum collection and its display.

Taxis and museums are culturally molded public spaces. They each have to follow some official rules in order to be accepted and, in the case of museums, are financed by the public. Both follow specific concepts of “collecting” and showing items in public. Both places are secular.

With the assemblage of the cabby, the driver’s very personal decisions about which items should be part of his/her working place are obvious. In a museum, private interests behind the composition of a collection are usually hidden behind ostensibly scientific concepts. The obvious difference between items being shown in a taxi or in a museum cannot be found in the objects themselves, but could be found in both locations.<sup>3</sup> However, the presentation style along with the rules of behavior with regard to access to the artifacts is distinct in the two situations. The items in the taxi in Montréal were openly presented so that everybody could touch them, whereas in museums the same objects are usually shown in a showcase and in a special atmosphere, which requires specific ritualized behavior from the public during their museum visit (Rein 2011).

Rules of restriction are typical in the public sphere of a museum and visits depend on special opening hours. According to the religious studies scholar, Peter Bräunlein, the habit of a family visiting a museum on a Sunday is very similar to a visit in a church; their way of walking is paced, their voices are low and their bearing is devout (Bräunlein 2004, 21). “Museumgoers [...] bring with them the willingness and ability to shift into a certain state of receptivity,” (Duncan 1994, 281).

### Categorizing Aspects of Religious Worldviews

The items found in the taxi were always called “religious,” never “sacred,” a distinction that should be kept in mind. The photographs of the religious leader and the *mezuzot* were reproductions of objects made for daily use. The items are connected with Jewish religion; they stand for the religious knowledge and tradition and, furthermore, the *mezuzot* protect its owner’s home, in this case the taxi, and remind the visitors/customers to be respectful of God.

What could the difference between a religious object and a sacred one be? As the anthropologist Karl-Heinz Kohl (2004) points out, everything in this world can be selected by people to become a religious or sacred object. This happens independently of its material, such as metal, stone or human

material including bones and skulls, special places such as landscape or specific plants, or assemblages of exotic things from other cultures or time periods such as old coins, porcelains, or textiles. Religious or sacred objects have other elements in common which qualify them to be adored such as, the intense social awareness concentrated on them, representing godly spiritual energy. Religious or sacred items are commonly respected.

At this point, I would like to introduce a further distinction between a religious object and a sacred one. Artifacts connected with a religious message can be used in daily life, for example as a means to express one’s own religious identity or as a sign of belonging to a community. In addition to holy items, religious objects embrace many different forms connected to a religious worldview turning the mundane into the sacred, like ordinary soaps<sup>4</sup> which are sold in religious shops as “Religious Merchandise.”

The analysis of the term “sacred,” which originated in the nineteenth century, has changed. In the last century it became obvious that there is no single domain that can be isolated and analyzed as such. It is a differentiated set of knowledge, behavior and beliefs. When religious objects are called sacred they are treated in an exclusive way which separates them from the ordinary. Sacred objects are stored in special places. Their treatment is combined with special taboos which separates them from the ordinary world. They are used and shown to the public only during special ritual times, in special places and usually to a selected group of people. Many times they represent the ancestors of individuals or of a community. Their value as a commodity cannot be expressed and sacred objects exist outside of an economic circulation, and they are not for sale.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes ownership changes, but usually only through violent robbery, such as the spoils of war or through illegal trade. Another characteristic of the “sacred” is the special story explaining when and why an ordinary object became sacred. With this history a community or an individual owner remembers extraordinary events which they experienced as an epiphany of spiritual beings (Rein 2011, 24).

The resemblance between the treatment of traditional sacred objects with artifacts collected in museums is, according to Kohl (2004, 32f), amazing. After having arrived in a museum, the items pass through several steps during their professional treatment which can be compared with the rites of passage (Rein 2010). They are taken out of their original context by being inventoried and at the same moment are removed from the economic exchange cycle. As part of the museum’s collection, they cannot circulate on the free market legally. The taboo, which separates traditionally sacred objects from ordinary life, is translated into the museum’s world: do not touch!

In the following, the mentioned aspects connected with the taxi driver



from Montréal including those of personal interest, identity, religion, political discourse, religious conflicts, ownership, tolerance, sacred and secular will be repeated from different perspectives. As essential points let us keep in mind that nothing is excluded *a priori* from the realm of the sacred and that what is sacred for a human group is so because local representations ascribe this quality to an object Derlon (n.d., 1). Those notions of sacred object vary not only from community to community, but also within the same community and over the course of history.

Anthropologist Brigitte Derlon, in connection with the European project of European Cultural Heritage Online (ECHO-NEPEC)<sup>6</sup> mentions additional distinctions and combinations of indigenous terms in the context of religious objects. According to her, if the adjective “sacred” is used to qualify objects it is often combined with the adjective “secret,” and furthermore we can find combinations of “sacred/sensitive” and “sacred/secret/sensitive.” All objects which are characterized thusly have a particular value for members of the originating community.

These are objects whose treatment by museums [...] requires prior consultation. We propose to use the all-encompassing expression “culturally sensitive object,” which is less reminiscent of religion and emphasizes the native peoples’ values and sensitivities effectively at the heart of the matter (Derlon n.d., 5–6).

Consequently, the following questions are the focus of interest. How do museums discern multiple aspects of religious objects? Are the curators aware of the complexity that religions embrace in different contexts of any culture/tradition? How can we differentiate the stories the museums are telling in their displays?

### Framing Religious Worldviews

In his article on religion in London’s museums, archeologist Crispin Paine describes five different types of museums named after the traditional academic disciplines and their supposed special approaches towards religious items (Paine 2000, 151). Interestingly, he found that the way of displaying artifacts does not depend completely on the academic approach of the curator but more on his/her personal interest in any religious topic. However, I disregard Paine’s academic categorization, which was mainly connected to the academic category of the museums and the display he knew, not with the differing academic approaches from the known disciplines like archaeology, anthropology, and history. Instead, I have differentiated between two established ways of displaying religious artifacts,

which can be mutually exclusive as well as complementary of each other; I call them the “art-party” and the “context-party” (Rein 2010, 48f).

A classic concept presents religious artifacts as “pure” art objects following a formal, aesthetic viewpoint (see Fig. 7.1). As the museologist Marilena Alivizatou expressed:

Today [“art primitive” respectively “arts premiers”] is mainly interpreted through the Eurocentric notion of “aesthetic universalism,” the credo that all people around the world create works of art worthy of study and display (Alivizatou 2008, 51).

I coined the word “art-party” to describe the influential group of curators who prefer the implementation of art concepts. This group defends the high aesthetic and technical quality of the artifacts made by tribal societies, also including their religious items. They present these artifacts in the same way as Western art is usually shown in art museums or art galleries. In these exhibitions, the object itself and its composition are the focus, together with the individual artist. They are presented for aesthetic contemplation completely isolated from their cultural context or suggestion of an original functional use.<sup>7</sup>



Fig. 7.1. Sculptures, Upper Koriwori, Papua New Guinea. Museum of World Cultures, Frankfurt am Main. (Raab 2008). 2009. (author’s photograph).

According to Paine:

In most art and archaeology museums the objects are chosen for their



aesthetic value, or for the light they throw on the development of style and form. Religion is introduced as a means of explaining the iconography, and to a lesser extent the purpose and style, of the objects [...] the role of Buddhism, is as a means of explaining the development of South and Southeast Asian art rather than for its own sake (Paine 2000, 168–170).

It is obvious that in an ethnographic museum the presentation of religious items as “pure art works” without any “functional look” (Vogel 1995, 13) emphasizes an evaluation of the pieces according to European/Western perspectives from a curator’s point of view or from that of the art market. Although in traditional societies the categories of “art” or “religion” do not exist we know that the Other have a clear knowledge of their masters and the right use of religious items.<sup>8</sup>

Because of their institutional history and their close connection with former colonial policies, ethnographic museums have a particular responsibility to document indigenous ideas and concepts of aesthetics (Veys 2010, 275) along with religious contexts. How, for example, is a mask judged according to indigenous concepts of beauty and its inherent spiritual power? The explanations can be the same as in Western societies, but they could be also very different, and still unknown.

In contrast to the art-party, the curators of the context-party refuse to accept a common denominator of “aesthetic universalism” and argue that pure art installations can be compared to a neo-colonization. After having taken Their Objects without listening to Their Stories, now, again, Western museums do not ask for Their Knowledge.

The context-party insists on showing and telling the stories of the people. They were the first to start to experiment with the relational approach. According to them, dialogues about museum objects should become an inclusive discussion between the producers, artists, their descendants, ritual specialists, and museum stuff. In an exhibition, discourse consultations with native groups or tribal representatives concerning the significance, display and conservation of the collections should be included (Alivizatou 2008, 52).

The relational way of looking at items and their context means the acknowledgement of the Other as intellectual contemporaries with their own item-centered perspective. Furthermore, it includes many more people which can be connected with the artifacts in museum collections (Rein 2010).

Today,<sup>9</sup> “religion” is shown in different museums: in art museums, where we find artifacts displayed as “religious art;” in cultural history museums, where the items are presented as being “part of cultures and traditions;” and in museums of religion, such as in Glasgow or in Taiwan

(Kamel 2008, 4), where they mainly represent aspects of the so-called monotheist religions.<sup>10</sup> The degree of contextualization is not prescribed for any museum, and there is no “quality management” for this topic. Consequently, the contextualization and ways of social inclusion can change from one exhibition to the next one. The “grand narrative,” a former Western construct from the nineteenth century about “universal aesthetics” and/or “religion,” is still dominant in most cases. In many ethnographic museums, religious artifacts are shown as “local” and still “exotic” elements of “past civilizations” (Benoit 2010, 75), usually structured and presented by type or geographical area although members of the cultures/traditions living today as active members in the global world:

Ethnographic museums [European or non-European] give a “frozen” image of traditional religion. The absence of evolution within worship contrasts with the museum dedicated to one specific religion which gives a historical dimension [like a Jewish Museum] (Benoit 2010, 76).

In a museum, however, we do not find only displayed religious objects. We have also the live performances of individual ritual specialists or of groups of people demonstrating and/or performing their ritual duties in public. I will not refer to these vivid and personal communications of religion or to the complexity of traditional taboos and questions about who owns traditional culture (Rein 2010).

In the following I will concentrate on the question how a dialogical way of presenting religious items in a museum could look. I start with the question of why any museum must be aware of contemporary topics and challenges which are characterized by new lifestyles, and new concepts of the individual and identity within a globalized world.

The curator Paul Goodwin highlights the fact:

[...] that in a global world, cultural identity is no longer limited to the singular categories of race, gender, sexuality, class or national identity. Instead, global technologies have inspired the non-stop flow of ideas and communication, whilst the social trends of exile, travel and migration have affected a wide-scale and constant movement of people across borders.

Whereas the power relations of the modernist and post-colonial modes could be defined by the negotiation between two subjects colonizer and colonized; oppressor and oppressed; museum and public; there is no such sense of centre and periphery in the culturally plural mode, where boundaries of nationhood, community and identity are called into question. As Homi Bhabha points out, these notions of cultural fixity have been replaced by “a complex on-going negotiation—amongst minorities, against assimilation.”<sup>11</sup>



According to the museologist Silaja Suntharalingam (2009, 2—3):

[...] museums are increasingly moving away from the notion of the curator as the sole interpreter handing down wisdom to a passive public. Instead, a space is being created for dialogue, interaction and the complex on-going negotiation between museum, visitor and artist. In terms of play, museums in a globalised world are increasingly becoming intermediaries and laboratories for experimenting with new cultural combinations and encounters.

The sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse suggests that “reflexivity” and “play” offer a useful means by which to approach the complexities of global culture in practical terms. He defines “reflexivity” as a means of “questioning one’s own position” (Nederveen Pieterse & Parekh 1995<sup>12</sup>), a strategy which particularly applies to museums that are eager to escape their modernist roots and the constraints of public cultural policy. The growing use of interactive methods and constructive approaches in museum methods of display and learning is evidence of this movement which focuses on the experiences of the individual (Paine 2000, 157).

The following two examples of exhibitions illustrate the challenge of how to expand the grand narrative with the result of enriching scientific data with self-reflective, contemporary personal stories concerning the topic of religion.

### Glaubenssache für Gläubige und Ungläubige

A museum without collections, the Stapferhaus in Lenzburg, Switzerland, acts as Museum of the Presence (*Haus der Gegenwart*,<sup>13</sup> Hächler 2007, 83). Each exhibition is significant because of the orientation to the presence (*Gegenwartsbezug*), the large absence of objects and the extensive communication with the visitors (Hächler 2007, 77). According to Hächler, the organizational philosophy of the Stapferhaus is that the initial point for a concept is the topic and the relevance of a question, which should touch contemporary, broad social values with a potential for discourse about a better achievement for orientation within a society and which are connected with experiences from the daily lives of the visitors (Ibid., 80<sup>14</sup>). As contemporaries, all visitors are treated as specialists of the present and therefore become, with their individual knowledge, an active part in any exhibition of the Stapferhaus. This approach of presenting is also called “social scenography,” a term created by the curator Beat Hächler.

The exhibition, *Glaubenssache für Gläubige und Ungläubige* (“Matter Concerning the Faith for Believers and Unbelievers”) was shown in the

Stapferhaus in 2006 and 2007. The grand narrative of the “religious landscape in Switzerland” was examined carefully and opened out into many contemporary stories on such topics as what “We” (the Swiss) believe; how “We” practice religion in daily life; and why “We” are fighting about faith (stapferhaus.ch n.d.). There was no longer one big story with regards to Christian belief. In the exhibition, the visitors were interviewed about their individual daily religious practice, their beliefs, their prayers, their hopes and what they think about death and the afterlife.

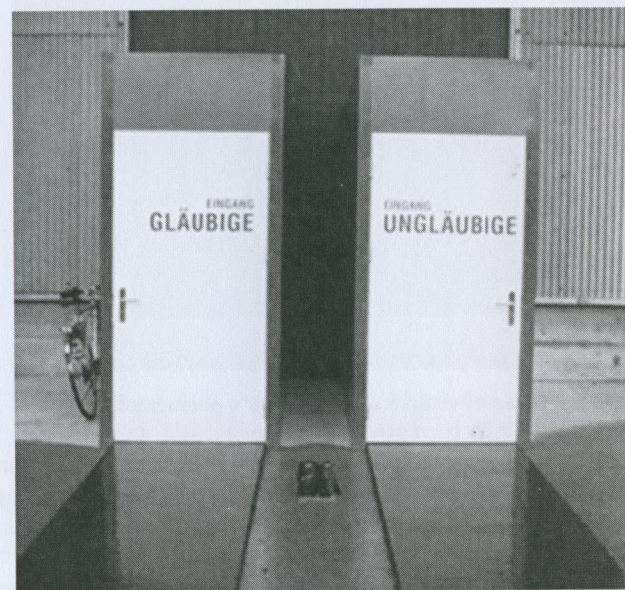


Fig. 7.2. Entrance of the Exhibition. 2007. (author’s photograph).

At the exhibit entrance the visitor had to decide if he/she belonged to the group of believers or non-believers. With this demand for a decision at the only entrance the visitors were aroused and preoccupied by the topic. Throughout the entire exhibit, they faced several “electronic Believer tests” (*Glaubenstests*).

At the end of the exhibition, each visitor received information about one of the five different groups of believers he/she belonged to. The groups included non-believers<sup>15</sup> who believe neither in God nor in any other spiritual, higher power; traditional believers who still believe when others have doubts; cultural-believers that are between believing and non-believing; alternative-believers who prefer meditation to classical prayers;



and patchwork-believers, who combine the different aspects that they personally prefer (Taverna 2007, 161). Through the exhibition, it became obvious that faith does not appear by itself, but that it is taught over years of practicing daily religious rituals together, as in the family.

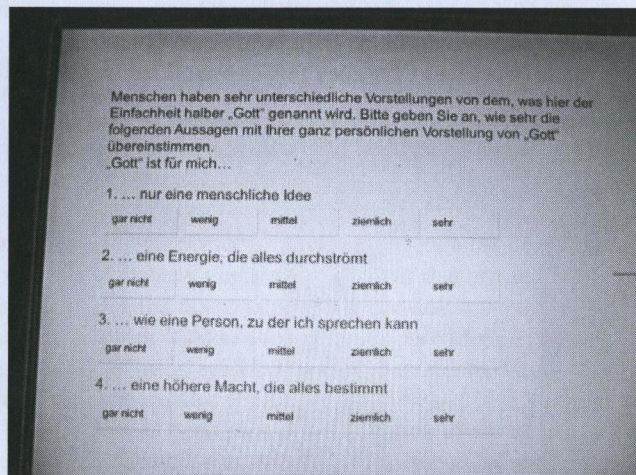


Fig. 7.3. The Questioning of visitors. 2007. (author's photograph).

One hundred people participated in the exhibition by contributing their personal “believer objects” (*Glaubenssache*<sup>16</sup>). On accompanying labels they explained how each piece contributed to their belief:

We believe in God, in Allah, in Angels, Karl Marx or in the spiritual power of thoughts. We pray, meditate or tell fortunes. We believe. But, decreasingly people believe in the same (Taverna 2007, 161<sup>17</sup>).

Religious controversy, as an important issue of the exhibition, mentioned not only the minaret vote in Switzerland in 2009 (news.bbc.co.uk) but also the printed *Ganesha* on a shopping bag from *Migros*, a Swiss supermarket. The exhibition in the Stapferhaus was characterized through contemporaneity and equivalency. All forms of beliefs were tolerated and the believers were likewise integrated as being part of the whole display.

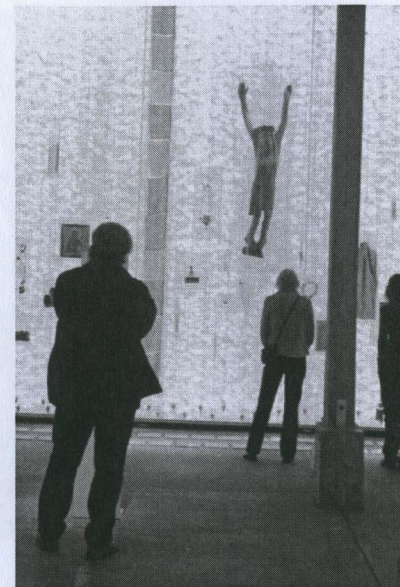


Fig. 7.4. One hundred religious objects, 2007. (author's photograph).

### Kraftwerk Religion: über Gott und die Menschen

Presented in the Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden in late 2010 until mid-2011, the exhibit, “Religious Energy: About Man and God,” brought together three hundred global objects and posed three questions in three sections. The first section, “Religion in society,” asked how religions are presented in today’s societies. Next, visitors were asked what keeps religious communities together and how believers experience their relation to God in the “Communities” section. Finally, the question of how atheists, people without any belief, can survive was posed in “Revelations and final questions.”

Compared with the Swiss display, the Dresden exhibition had a more academic, descriptive character which followed different political, historical and institutional questions. From the large amount of information and changing perspectives presented, I will mention only the few aspects which impressed me the most. The term religion was not challenged, although several very interesting artifacts and their contexts were presented as examples of an “atheist approach” (Fig 7.5).





Fig. 7.5. View into the gallery, "Religions in the Society". (© Deutsches Hygiene Museum/David Brandt [Religious Energy]).

The label accompanying the Charles Darwin doll stated the following: "Charles Darwin, one of the founders of modern theory of evolution, has long since become an icon to atheist movements. He is produced as a doll for the children of atheist parents."<sup>18</sup>

*Frösi* was the name of a monthly magazine for children, published by Verlag Junge Welt in the former GDR. "Frösi" is an abbreviation originating from a young pioneer song, the first line of which text contained the invitation, "*Fröhlich sein und singen*" (be happy and sing). From 1953 until 1965, the name of the magazine was *Fröhlich sein und singen*. From 1965 until 1991, the name was shortened to "*Frösi*." Since 1956, every November the "Frösi-Weihnachtskalender" was published as part of the magazine. "As a communist alternative to traditional Advent calendars it was called a 'year-end calendar' or 'December calendar' and had no Christian motifs such as manger scenes or angels and it had thirty-one doors rather than the traditional twenty-four" (quoted from the exhibition label).



Fig. 7.6. Frösi December Calendar. 1911. (author's photograph).<sup>19</sup>

The voices of individuals active in religious life including theologians, bishops, Christians, Jews, Muslims and atheists as well as academics and others were heard in the exhibit giving their comments on special conflict-loaded questions. The conflict of wearing headscarves at state schools was presented from the perspective of an eighteen-year-old female Muslim student. Adjacent to this installation comments by several representatives from the academic and political/institutional life were added to hers. Each visitor could vote for which arguments he/she believed was the most convincing.

Compared with the Stapferhaus display, the visitor in Dresden did not become an exhibit by him or herself. Here, they were free to decide how to become involved through interactive stations where they were asked to comment upon actual questions. They could also post comments on a blackboard or on the internet. The responses to personal questions about beliefs related to the faiths of the individuals interviewed for this exhibit served to promote independent thinking by the visitors (Grimm 2010).

The exhibition covered an expansive range of different topics and showed many exquisite artifacts which convincingly demonstrated the use of religious symbols in politics as well as provoked, in their special combinations, severe consequences either for the artist or the curators and priests which dared to exhibit them.



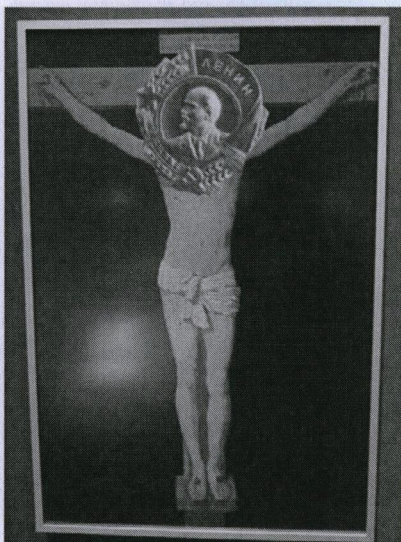


Fig. 7.7. The Crucifix. 1985. Vagrich Bakhchanyan (1938-2010). 2011. (author's photograph).

When the Soviet artist Vagrich Bakhchanyan produced *The Crucifix* it was understood as a critique of the veneration of Lenin in the Soviet Union and was not allowed to be exhibited. Today, in Russia, its display has been again prohibited, this time because it supposedly offends the dignity of Christians. In 2006, the curator Andrei Yerofeev exhibited "Forbidden Art," works that other museums had refused to show for political reasons. The Russian Orthodox Church was up in arms. He was sentenced to a severe fine, and fired from his post at the Sakharov Museum (quoted from the exhibition label).

The multi-perspective approach toward religious and non-religious aspects also included under the rather discriminating topic "Magical objects,"<sup>20</sup> non-European, and non-Christian items such as the well-known *nkisi*, a power figure from the Kongo.<sup>21</sup> Also included was a printed global, contemporary set of oracle speeches, which can be used anywhere as a quick spell to influence one's future, called McVoodoo (Fig. 7.9).



Fig. 7.8. Nkisi figure. Kongo, nineteenth century. Ethnological Museum, Berlin State Museums. 2011. (author's photograph).

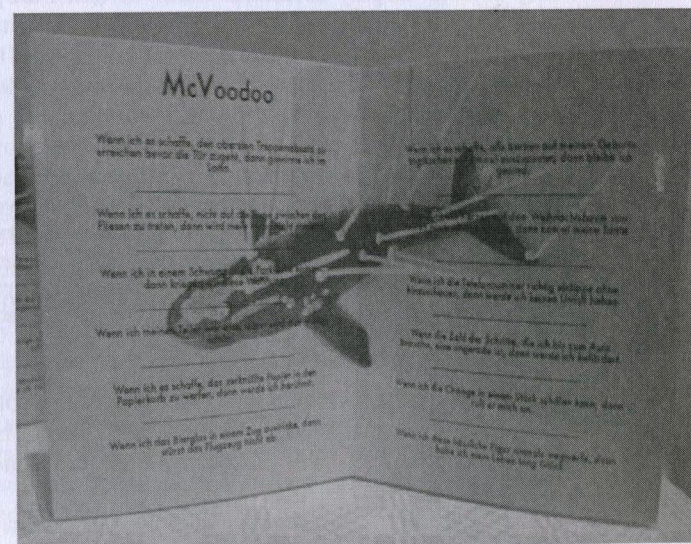


Fig. 7.9. McVoodoo, 2011. (author's photograph).



In a comparison between the two exhibits, it is obvious that the latter wanted to provoke each visitor to become aware of his/her own faith. The Dresden display welcomed visitors with an overwhelming offer of items and multiple aspects which could be connected with religions. Additionally, the curator in Dresden kept a distance from the visitors (Grimm 2010). Although this display was an outcome of the events of 9/11, as the director Dr. Klaus Vogel observed, the curator was very careful neither to proselytize, alert the public, nor to present the topic in too much detail (Grimm 2010). The Dresden curator Petra Lutz stated: "We wanted to differentiate and admit irritation [. . .] we would be already content, when the visitor would mistrust their assumed certainty" (Grimm 2010).<sup>22</sup> With this final comment by Lutz we return to our topic of how religious worldviews are framed in a museum.

### Museums as Secular Institutions Framing Religious Worldviews

Ethnographic museums have for a number of years been confronted with manifold reproaches about continuing to represent colonial ideologies and concepts of the nineteenth century. They have been confronted with the criticism of exoticizing presentations or reproducing stereotypes of the Other while not being able to display historical items of non-European traditions adequately in a contemporary global, mobilized world. In these sequences of reproaches, the sacred objects in museum collections have played a special role in the process of the Othering. As the anthropologist Shelly Errington once summarized:

It seems to me that these attitudes—the one that views Primitive Man as obsessed with ritual and terrified of spirits, and the one that views Primitive Man as living harmoniously with nature and as in touch with other higher realities—are each other's flip side. Both should be called *primitivism* because both make the same moves that Edward Sapir implied were characteristic of "orientalism:" the moves of dichotomizing, otherizing, and essentializing [1979] (Errington 1994, 215).

However, we know that, as Saphinaz-Amal Naguib formulated, the Other, "[...] is no longer a stable or even meaningful category [...] If there is no other, who then is the self? The twin terms of dichotomy are interdependent and if the one goes, so the other" (Naguib 2007, 7).

Without going deeper into this discussion I would like to follow the question of which active role could an ethnographic museum play within this jungle of political and theoretical expectations and liabilities against the

former or actual owners of the religious artifacts on the one hand, and the museum's obligation to fulfil the task of "*Bildung*" (educating the public<sup>23</sup>) on the other.

At this point, we have to ask how effective the *Bildungsauftrag* (duty to educate and inspire; cf. note 2) of the museum being completely handed over to the public as "self-*Bildung*" was. In other words, through "self-formation," as suggested by museologist Mette Houlberg Rung:

[...] with the increasing focus on visitor oriented museum practice, the museum is becoming an ideal space, where individuals can practice their self-formation, and become ideal creative citizens and workers in the so called knowledge society or innovation society (Houlberg Rung 2008, 1).

Let us keep in mind that museums were the followers of the churches or religious institutions, which in the succession of the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century lost their dominant position in society. With their public obligation to educate the people, museums as products of the ongoing process of the Enlightenment always remained civic institutions. They have significant collections of religious items, and therefore the actual situation of museums can be also expressed as "caught between the devil and the deep blue sea."

With this tangible and intangible religious heritage in mind, together with the obligation for *Bildung* and being confronted with the challenges of the global world, I have no perfect solution to suggest for the ideal framing of religious world views in ethnographic museums. However, I would like to emphasize that *Bildung* is more than the displayed items shown together with the individual voices within an exhibition. A dialogical, relational approach, which works with social inclusion, collecting all the personal stories connected with the museum objects, is a very convincing method to bring new voices into old and new collections.

The traditional *Bildungsauftrag* of a museum also postulates the communication at a higher level of knowledge which brings additional perspectives including those of science, history and political conditions. They cannot be found in all the personal comments and experiences which, while being repeated again and again, tend to make any topic banal. The suggested self-formation cannot be accepted as a limitation of the *Bildungsauftrag* but is rather a further challenge for museums to find new ways for a self-reflexive combination of academic knowledge with individual, local understanding and personal experience. This counts especially for displays on the all-embracing topic of "religious worldviews."



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is the revised form of a paper presented at the international workshop "Sacred things in the post secular society" at the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm, May 5, 2011. For supporting this article, with critical comments, information, literature, and photos, many thanks to Dr. Maraike Bückling, Liebieghaus Skulpturengalerie Frankfurt am Main; Dr. Viv Golding, University of Leicester; Sibylle Lichtensteiger, Stapferhaus Lenzburg; Dr. Albert Lutz, Museum Rietberg in Zürich; Per B. Rekald, Museum of Cultural History, University of Oslo; Dr. Michael Tellenbach, Museum Weltkulturen in Mannheim; Odile Vassas, Deutsches Hygiene-Museum in Dresden; and Dr. Johannes Wachten, Jüdisches Museum Frankfurt am Main. Thanks to Patricia Riesenkampff for the proofreading of this text.

<sup>2</sup> A *mezuzah* is a parchment that, according to Jewish beliefs, offers protection. In Jewish homes it is typically affixed to doorframes.

<sup>3</sup> Author's translation of the original German: "I can imagine many situations, also including the mentioned objects under specific circumstances in our collection. Actually, we have only one *mezuzah*. What is special about the *mezuzah* I do not know. It says nothing to me, at the moment. However, I doubt that a taxi is the right place for these objects." Johannes Wachten, *Personal communication*, April 19, 2011. *Vorstellen kann ich mir vieles – auch die genannten Objekte unter bestimmten Bedingungen in die Sammlung aufzunehmen. Zur Zeit haben wir freilich nur eine Mezuza. Was es mit den sogenannten „Gebetstafeln“ auf sich hat, weiß ich nicht. Sagt mir im Augenblick nichts. Ob solche Gegenstände freilich in einem Taxi (ÖPNV?) was zu suchen haben, bezweifle ich.*

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.fm5.at/images/upload/slide/23141.jpg> (accessed August 26, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> A special case is the market for relics, which is officially forbidden by the Christian church. See Michael Lang 2011. *Heilige Knochen—Das Geschäft mit den Reliquien*.

<sup>6</sup> ECHO stands for European Cultural Heritage Online, <http://echo.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/home/publicRelation/reports/pdfs/D3.3.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2011); NECEP stand for non-European components of European patrimony, <http://www.necp.net/project/NECEPbackofficeHB.pdf> (accessed April 23, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> One known problem of historical objects is the missing data about their context. In such a case, the circumstances about the collecting process and other information together with interviews of people who still remember the artifacts would help to present a vivid impression of it.

<sup>8</sup> According to Shelly Errington: "A decorated ritual object that has become High Primitive Art has two relevant qualities: its participation in the sacred and its formal plastic qualities (to use-art-talk). And indeed non-Western objects entered the realm of Primitive Art by two roads: by their formal aesthetic qualities, or by their expressiveness of shamanistic power. In practice, these two are often merged in the same objects: it is no accident that the mask, reliquary figure, or totemic ancestor figure stands as paradigmatic of the highest, most Authentic Primitive Art. The terms 'ceremony,' 'ritual,' 'rite,' 'initiation,' 'sacred,' 'sacrificial,' 'ancestor' and 'totemic' which occur on many museum labels seem to qualify primitive art objects

as being connected with religion. They '...leave the casual visitor with the distinct impression that 'Primitive Man' is obsessed with ritual or, at least, that Primitive Art expresses higher realities." Shelly Errington. "What became authentic Primitive Art?" *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (1994) 216.

<sup>9</sup> "One of the first big exhibitions was the Tutankhamun exhibition in 1980s," Isabelle Benoit God(s). "A User's guide. A European experience of religion and exhibition," in *Museums and faith*, eds. Marie-Paule Jungblut & Rosmarie Beier-de Haan (Luxembourg: Musée des la Ville de Luxembourg, 2010) 75.

<sup>10</sup> "Since the 1980s several exhibitions have increasingly taken thematic approaches or even a comparative approach to religions [Taiwan, Glasgow]" Ibid. 78.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Silaja Suntharalingam quoted in Silaja Suntharalingam, "Tate Triennial 2009: Positioning Global Strategies at Tate Britain," *Edition 5 Tate Encounters*, <http://www2.tate.org.uk/tate-encounters/edition-5/Silaja-Suntharalingam-Tate-Triennial-2009> (accessed March 30, 2013) 2: Bhaba quoted in Ibid.: "The emergence of an accompanying rhetoric for global culture is reflected by 'the proliferation of new terms such as 'inter-cultural,' 'trans-cultural' and 'cross-cultural.' These terms are increasingly being used to displace the well-known politicized terms of 'cultural diversity' and 'multiculturalism.'"

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> "Stätte der menschlichen Begegnung und geistigen Auseinandersetzung," Beat Hächler "Vier Thesen aus der Arbeit mit der Ausstellung Strafen des Stapferhauses Lenzburg" in *Das Ausstellen und das Immaterielle*, eds. Rosmarie Beier-de Haan & Marie-Paule Jungblut, Beiträge der 1. Museologischen Studentage. Neumünster, Bd. 1, (Luxembourg: Musée d'Histoire de la Ville Luxembourg, 2007)79.

<sup>14</sup> "Ausgangspunkt ist das Thema [...] [das] grundlegende gesellschaftliche (Werte)fragen der Gegenwart aufgreift], [das] von Natur aus breit und nicht eng angelegt [ist], [das] ein Diskurspotential [hat], und ein gesamtgesellschaftliches Orientierungsbedürfnis erkennen [lässt] und [das] nahe an den Alltagserfahrungen der Besucherinnen und Besucher [liegt]." Ibid. 76–84.

<sup>15</sup> *Areligiöse, Traditionsreligiöse, Kulturreligiöse, Alternativreligiöse, Patchworkreligiöse*, quoted from the exhibition.

<sup>16</sup> "Glaubenssachen sind persönliche Dinge aus der eigenen Glaubensbiografie. 100 Personen zeigen ihre Glaubensobjekte und sagen, was ihr Ding zur Glaubenssache macht."

<http://www.stapferhaus.ch/ausstellungen/glaubenssache-lenzburg/rundgang.html> (accessed April 16, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> "Wir glauben an Gott, an Allah, an Engel, Karl Marx oder an die Kraft der Gedanken. Wir beten, meditieren oder legen Karten. Wir glauben. Aber immer weniger glauben das Gleiche." Erhard, Taverna 2007. "Glaubenssache." *Bulletin des médecins Suisse* 88(4): 161.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted from the exhibition label.

<sup>19</sup> See also, <http://www.ddr-comics.de/froesiwk.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> "Magical Objects. Objects can't really have magical power: many religious and many sciences agree on this point. The idea that a stone, a plant, an animal, a figurine, a picture, writing, or any other substance could be magical is generally



looked on as superstitious or backward. And yet people seem to have an unshakeable belief in the power of objects, whether lucky talismans (from Greek via Arabic *Tilsam*, magical image), or protective amulets (from Latin *amuletum*, giver of power). Anything can serve as a magical object. Even a personal item that holds memories for its owner is a kind of charm," quoted from the exhibition label.

<sup>21</sup> "Figures of power stand guard at the entry to a village. They are involved to make contracts binding, and used in rituals for the good of the community. Their strength derives from *nkisi*, or medicine, which a ritual specialist concocts from various ingredients and applies to the figure. Europeans called such power figures and other objects 'fetishes,' and associated them with demon-worshipping or idol-worshipping cults. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they looked on object cults as an early stage of human development. Today we see that such objects were developed not least through contact with Europeans," quoted from the exhibition label.

<sup>22</sup> Translation by the author. "Wir wollen differenzieren und Verwirrung zulassen," sagt Kuratorin Petra Lutz, die schon zufrieden wäre, "wenn die Besucher ihre vermeintlichen Gewissheiten anzweifeln würden."

<sup>23</sup> There are some problems while translating the German notions "*Bildung*" and "*Bildungsauftrag*" into other languages. As Per Rekdal commented "The 'obvious' translation of *Bildungsauftrag* would be 'educational mission,' but I think it particularly misses the meaning of 'Bildung.' *Bildung* ('dannelse' in Norwegian/Danish) is the level of insight/education/values/knowledge, etc. the complete 'forming' one might say, of a person." (personal communication August 12, 2012) In the following text I use both notions in German to make sure I use the concept I mean. A mixture of languages can also be an expression of transcultural writing and understanding. It is also a way of accepting multiple voices and participation in texts.



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