Book Review


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Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives is a welcome, timely, and useful collection of short essays that have been contributed by established scholars in fields dedicated to material religion, museum studies, curatorial practices, history, architecture, culture and the arts. The most recent addition to the other “go to” works concerning religion and museums such as Carol Duncan’s Civilizing Rituals (1995) and Crispin Paine’s Religious Objects in Museums (2013), the book does what no book has yet to do: it focuses on the “increasingly vital role” that museums are playing in “cultural affairs in countries north and south, east and west” (p. 1) at local levels, while examining the strategies that religion and museums are utilizing in response to globalization. The editors write: “Museums are responding to new opportunities that have come from globalization, including the globalization of religion” (p. 1). Accordingly, the volume covers a very good breadth and scope of museums in terms of geography and style. Not only is it timely in terms of its contribution to emerging themes in the field of material religion, more widely reaching issues are raised concerning the relationships between political leaders and “resurgences in theocracy” and extremism, museums, collecting, culture and nationalism, and the need to understand the foundational role that religion plays in “sociopolitical life” (p. 1).

Highlighting current research in the field, the overall aim of the collection is to offer readers an overview into how religion and museums are connected, and practically, how they might be critically approached and explored by researchers. This aim is structurally achieved through six accessible and interconnected sections that offer practical examples situated within appropriate theoretical movements: 1) museum buildings, 2) religious objects, 3) responses to objects and displays, 4) collecting and research, 5) museums’ interpretations of religion and religious objects, and 6) the different styles of museums where religion is presented.

Well written and easy to read, the book offers researchers (student and more senior alike) a practical and informative guide to not only understanding the ways in which religions are presented and religious objects are handled, conserved and displayed; but an inroad to understanding how secular spaces (museums) are sometimes treated as/related...
to religious places by different types of religious devotees. At least at private, communal and national levels, museums’ spaces are relationally and potentially “other” to that which they are designed to be, namely “secular”. Museums can, indeed, be ambiguous places. Further, their reputable, public, sometimes state-sponsored guise gives credence to that which lies inside. As the editors of the book write in reference to state sponsored museums: “national museums around the world, from India to Ethiopia, Mexico to Indonesia, are filled with ritual objects and sacred artifacts that have been vital to indigenous and global traditions in their regions; by incorporating them into museum collections particular religious identities are integrated into the heart of the nation” (p. 2). This is significant for many reasons, but particularly with regard to indigenous populations where voices have often been muted.

Among the chapters found in the book, I would like to draw attention to Chapter 15: “Sacred Objects and Conservation: The Changing Impact of Sacred Objects on Conservators” by Samantha Hamilton. The chapter highlights the fact that curatorial and museum practices concerning indigenous objects (that often occupy ontologically misunderstood positions in a culture) are changing. It is no longer enough to accommodate the things of “others”, but emphasis is now being placed on collaboration, knowledge sharing, and community participation (museum community and Indigenous community), and co-decision-making processes.

Detailing the emergence and development of the profession of conservation and preservation practices in European countries, Hamilton tells us that it was a change in 2008 legislation whereby the “significance” of a cultural heritage item, beyond its material properties alone, has emerged as a quality of importance. This “significance” rests in what is currently referred to as “intangible heritage”, for example it concerns cultural meanings attributed to objects, and the relationships that groups and individuals have with particular things. This change in conservators’ thinking can also be attributed to working with Indigenous sacred materials in a museum context” (p. 126) and has led to current, and needed, ethnographic conservation practices where questions concerning authority and who has the right to speak about the presentation and preservation of sacred materials are rightly raised. Using the example of how Australian Aboriginal artwork is often handled in museum settings, Hamilton says that although museum curators “can be experts in Indigenous cultures they may be unaware” of the cultural contextual specifics surrounding a particular object which might lead that object to be displayed in a harmful or distressing way from the perspectives of Australian Indigenous peoples (p. 138). Consequently, Hamilton tells us that “conservation bodies in Australia, New Zealand and Canada have updated their codes of ethics to include respect for the sacred integrity or cultural significance of cultural materials” (p. 138). The recognition of intangible heritage adds real value not only to conservation and curatorial practices, but to areas of research where cases of intangible heritage are currently beginning to merge with debates on material religion.

This forward-looking chapter is one good example of many in this excellent collection of chapters. This book is recommended reading for scholars looking to conduct fieldwork research into the growing significances of religion and museums.