

## Book Reviews

*Working in the Fields of Meaning: Cultural Communities, Museums and the New Pluralism*, by David J. Goa. Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, 2013. 284pp. pb., \$19.95. ISBN-13: 9781551953168.

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### Keywords

religious studies, museum studies, ethnography

This is a very different book to the dozens of reworked theses and project reports that weigh down museum studies bookshelves nowadays. This is the product of many years working in museums, working with different communities, and reflecting on that work. Above all it is the product of innumerable friendships, and its central theme is the crucial importance to museum fieldwork of personal relationships, and its main message that there is no skimping the time and commitment the building of real friendships takes.

Goa's thinking and feeling is suffused by religion, which clearly dominates his understanding of humankind. He is explicit about the importance to his human sympathies, and hence to his work, of his own cultural and religious background—that of a Norwegian Lutheran Canadian. “The folk culture world of Norway, one of Europe's smallest countries, has given me a little ground on which to stand to explore worlds as far removed from it as Mogul India and Kisumu Kenya” (125). It would be sad, though, if what he has to say were ignored by those of a more secular turn of mind. For his argument does not depend on religion at all—it depends simply on human sympathy, and asks that museum workers should put human sympathy at the core of their work and technique, and should be willing to invest the time to understand their constituents.

The book is very much embedded in the Canadian context—reading his book in Europe one is struck by the idea of society being a series of discrete “communities;” it is stimulating to ask how some of the approaches Goa suggests might be adapted to a superficially more homogeneous society. Goa goes some way to answering this question—how should museums approach the dominant tradition—by describing his great Anno Domini exhibition. His emphasis on individual friendships as the fundamental basis of museum

fieldwork is valid everywhere.

Goa attacks the anodyne neutrality of so many exhibitions. History is never neutral, and museum exhibitions may vitally affect some visitors. He gives the example of a Baghdadi visitor deeply affected by an exhibition on Genghis Khan which quite ignored the conqueror's grandson's still-remembered holocaust of that city.

Goa wields his sword, too, in defence of the curator against the manager. Though this is, happily, usually a false battle, he is right that curators and managers come from different places (even when they are the same person). "A singularly managerial approach demands that issues be worked around, at best, and censored, at worst. A curatorial approach, on the other hand, is an approach that holds public debate as central to its mandate, and sees the curator as a public scholar working with and through the various communities of interest" (169). But curators have a duty to make much better use than they usually do of their collections, and to devote much more time and care to building them up, based on the knowledge and understanding that developing friendships can create. His examples from his own curatorial work are very moving.

Goa writes so well, has such important things to say, such useful advice to give, and tells such good stories, that everyone involved in museum work not only should read it, but will greatly enjoy doing so. This could indeed be the most important book on social history curatorship there is; it deserves a much wider readership than its obscure title and small publisher are likely to get it.