Context and Experiencing the Sacred

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Abstract
This essay considers how far the original sacred context of a painting or other artefact should be acknowledged in modern galleries and museums. It is argued that such institutions should be concerned with rather more than the fostering of aesthetic experience. An educational role is also important, and this entails that, although nothing should be done to encourage religion, contextualizing painting and artefact will also open up the possibility for concomitant religious experience. Although various formal distinctions are noted, the argument is conducted by means of a large number of specific examples.

1. Introduction

Much of the content of museums and art galleries was once found in sacred contexts, such as churches. So the change in setting inevitably raises the question of whether and how far these new contexts, as well as necessarily generating additional changes in meaning and function, might not also allow the original role of painting or artefact in some measure to survive, and perhaps also whether this should even be fostered by the institution that is now its new home. These are the kind of questions that I propose to consider here. Until towards the end of the paper all my examples will be Christian but my point is intended to apply more widely. I shall take painting first, and then deal more briefly with the kind of sacred artefacts that are to be found in museums, partly because most are managed in two separate kinds of institution and partly because significantly different issues are also raised by each.

2. Religious Painting in the Gallery

One common way of responding to the change of location is to suggest that the setting within an art gallery actually commonly achieves the intention behind the painting better than its original setting.[1] After all, it may be pointed out, churches are often inadequately lighted,

[1] E.g. S. Alpers 'The Museum as a Way of Seeing', in I. Karp and S. Lavine (eds), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1991), 27.

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with distracting elements nearby such as candles or flowers, while the fencing of altars also precludes closer inspection. So it is not at all implausible to contend that the art gallery makes better success of the painting, especially where there is sufficient space to hang pictures in a single line against a plain background rather than with others nestling below and above, competing for attention.

Such claims are as old as the origins of publicly displayed art in the eighteenth century. Goethe is an early example of someone prepared to assert that galleries had now taken over many of the functions once supported by the churches, not least in providing space for contemplation. Commenting on a visit to Dresden Gallery in 1768 he observed how 'the profound silence that reigned created a solemn and unique impression, akin to the emotion experienced upon entering a House of God, and it deepened as one looked at the ornaments on exhibition which, as much as the temple that housed them, were objects of adoration in that place consecrated to the holy ends of art.'[2] The undoubted parallels have even led one contemporary art historian (Carol Duncan) to suggest that the ritual analyses of van Gennep and others, originally intended for religious practice, can with equal ease be applied to the art gallery and museum.[3] Certainly, with the huge number of tourists now visiting cathedrals, one might well argue that the quiet space necessary for such contemplation is more likely to be found in the gallery than in churches, however great their art – not of course before crowd-pullers such as Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* or Rembrandt's *Night Watch* but in the galleries not directly on the usual tourist track. But Duncan's point is deeper than this. It is that the ritual space of the gallery is actually used to effect a liminal transition towards certain authorized ways of viewing the art within. Whereas once a civic ritual for validating an aristocratic way of life (aristocrats first produced these public kinds of display) or particular assumptions about national progress (as in Napoleon's treatment of the presentation of paintings in the Louvre), by their current organization they now invite knowing endorsement of certain approved professional ways of reading art history (as in MOMA's culmination in modernism).[4] Such a contention is probably to go too far, but its general implication is that to introduce religious claims that legitimate a religious interpretation of the painting is not a matter of introducing

[2] From Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, quoted in G. Bazin, *The Museum Age* (New York: Universe Books, 1967), 160.

[3] C. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[4] Ibid., 1–47, 102–32.

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the only contested reading. There already are plenty of them in the gallery.

Consider then what difference might be made in introducing such claims. Take Titian's *Noli Me Tangere*, now in the National Gallery in London.[5] During the Second World War this was the first painting to be taken out of storage and brought back to London by popular request. Presumably even then its popularity stemmed in part from the fact that its resurrection theme could also be read as indicative of a wider hope in defeat of Nazi threats to life and limb. Now, however, for most British viewers the mythological reading will be entirely to the fore, if, that is, the painting is understood at all. In itself, such an interpretation need not be inimical to Christianity since some sort of spiritual element is at least retained, and that is perhaps why clergy sometimes endorse just such an approach, as in John Drury's popular Yale paperback *Painting the Word*.[6] Nonetheless, in seeking a universal shared message is something not lost, in particular Titian's desire to express the specifics of the Christian faith in Christ's resurrection functioning as mediator of the believer's own personal survival of death? Indeed, infra-red analysis of the painting has revealed the removal of a gardener's hat from Christ's head, presumably in order better to suggest the continuous sweep of an arc through Mary Magdalene's kneeling body to heaven, mediated through her eyes meeting Christ's and then carried beyond by means of a tree to the heavens above. Or, for a second example, consider a medieval statue in the Burrell Collection in Glasgow, minimally labelled St Margaret.[7] Even with that label only an aesthetic understanding is possible, since no guidance is even given as to which St Margaret it is, far less the specifics of the story of St Margaret of Antioch. But is the viewer not entitled to know how the statue was intended to function religiously, as an inspiration in the face of the terrors of pregnancy, with the dragon chained at her feet representing those fears?

The Director of the National Gallery during the period that included the Second World War was Sir Kenneth Clark (1933–45). He declared that 'the only reason for bringing together works of art in a public place is that … they produce in us a kind of exalted happiness. For a moment there is a clearing in the jungle: we pass on

[5] For illustration, www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-noli-me-tangere.

[6] J. Drury, *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and their Meanings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), esp. 117–20.

[7] For illustration, www.flickr.com/photos/fordtotti/424898142.

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refreshed, with our capacity for life increased and with some memory of the sky'.[8] One might paraphrase this as a claim to 'uplifting experience', a term that for some might be seen as essentially aesthetic and for others more properly called spiritual. Even professional philosophers sometimes acknowledge the fuzzy boundaries between the terms. So, for instance, Iris Murdoch clearly allows the spiritual, the aesthetic and moral to slide easily into one another. Thus she talks of art, in a manner like prayer, encouraging focused attention, and so helping to denude us of self-concern. As she puts it, 'The art-object is an analogy of the person-object, we intuit our best selves in its mirror, and not only when we are under its spell. Art with which we are familiar stays with us as an intimation that love has power and the world makes sense … We see in God in a magnified form the analogy between work of art and person'.[9]

Although not one of her own examples, we might consider the familiar case of Mark Rothko's abstract paintings. It might seem hard to differentiate between the likely effect of the exhibition in 2008–9 of his restaurant series at the Tate and the experience on offer at the Rothko Chapel in Houston.[10] Nonetheless, there is something to be said on the other side. Those who speak of being pulled through such paintings into an experience of something beyond, in short of an implicit experience of transcendence, surely have in mind something more like a religious experience whereas those who find value particularly in the rich texture and intricate variety of the painted surface (despite it being of essentially one colour), might more naturally be described as having an aesthetic experience – not that this precludes the same individual from having both types of experience, or even what I have identified as one type sometimes being experienced as the other.[11]

There is of course extensive philosophical literature both on how aesthetic and religious experience might be defined, as also on

[8] K. Clark, 'The Ideal Museum', *Art News* 52 (1954), 29.

[9] I. Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 81.

[10] The Seagram murals originally intended for the Four Seasons restaurant in New York were reunited for an exhibition at the Tate (26th September 2008– 1st February 2009). Dedicated in 1971, the Houston Chapel is open to all faiths; its mission statement talks of a wish 'to inspire people to action through art and contemplation'.

[11] The quality of the textured surface could be taken to signify the richness of divine creation, the call to transcendence as no more than a vague call to otherness.

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whether it might yield assessable truth claims.[12] However, to enter into such debates here would take me too far from my primary aim, of exploring what role religious insight and experience might be given in the modern gallery. The only concession I need for the purposes of the discussion that follows is that religious experience might in principle be identified as distinguishable from other types of supervenience, such as the moral and aesthetic. In all of this I hasten to add that in attempting to make such a differentiation I am not concerned with whether either aesthetic or religious experience is in fact veridical, that is with whether it provides content with appropriate truth-claims attached. All I am asserting is that it is possible to distinguish between them, even if one thinks that either one or both are misleading or even devoid of truth content altogether.

Perhaps the basic intelligibility of the contrast can best be supported by considering a case where the gallery context almost exactly matches the original viewing conditions of a religious masterpiece, for under such circumstances it cannot be claimed that all the introduction of religious elements does is make up for deficiencies created by its new context. Consider, then, Poussin's *Seven Sacraments* as displayed in the National Gallery in Edinburgh.[13] Given a room to themselves with subdued lighting (probably not dissimilar to the original seventeenth-century viewing conditions), and displayed in the same order as they might naturally occur in the course of a human life (beginning with baptism and concluding with extreme unction), this pattern closely matches the manner in which they were originally intended to be viewed. The second series (which this is), like the first, was commissioned by a layman, and never intended to be hung in a church. Paul Fréart de Chantelou chose to display them in his own residence, with the paintings covered by small curtains and only unveiled when contemplative consideration in strict order was the stated aim.[14]

[12] The very notion of aesthetic experience has been challenged by, among others, G. Dickie and Nelson Goodman. For philosophers surveying the current state of play, see R. Shusterman and A. Tomlin (ed), *Aesthetic Experience* (London: Routledge, 2008). For a recent representative selection on religious experience, see C. Martin and R. T. McCutcheon (eds), *Religious Experience: A Reader* (Durham: Acumen, 2012).

[13] www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/P/4381.

[14] P. Rosenberg and V. Damian, *Nicolas Poussin: Masterpieces 1594–1665* (London: Cassell, 1995), 78. Poussin approved (letter of 24th May, 1648); for Poussin's interest in Stoicism, see A. Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin* (London: Phaidon, 1967).

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Yet, despite such requirements obviously helping to secure aesthetic ends, aesthetic appreciation and religious appreciation will, I think, still be inherently different. Thus, with the former the viewer is likely to focus on the order, proportion and emotional restraint that commonly characterizes a classical aesthetics such as Poussin's, whereas with the latter primary interest will most commonly be found to lie in Poussin's attempt to resituate the institution of the sacraments firmly in the context of the ancient world. Both approaches will then expand along quite different tracks. So, for example, it is unlikely to be of aesthetic interest that in the *Baptism* we have a very rare attempt to record not just the descent of the dove on Christ but also the voice of the Father from heaven, visually of course quite a difficult thing to achieve but successfully suggested by Poussin in the way in which some bystanders point in astonishment to an empty part of the canvas, and thus the painting reflects accurately the biblical records. Then again, in *Ordination* the capital letter E placed on the pillar beside which keys are being handed to Peter is unlikely to be of aesthetic interest but considerably changes the religious focus. Almost certainly a reference to Plutarch's work *On the E at Delphi*, it argues for a non-exclusive kind of Catholicism, one in which not only the artist's own interest in Stoicism could be maintained but also the majesty and mysteriousness of a God to be found not just in Christianity but also at the Delphic shrine where this letter was taken to mean the grounding of all existence in the divine.[15] Nor need this be simply a matter of additional factual details. They could also help engender in the believer, in the one case a sense of how baptism is an essentially trinitarian experience while in the other it could lead to a more inclusive understanding of what it is to be sacramental, with such insights sometimes extending beyond the purely intellectual and into the experiential. In other words, for example *Ordination* thus understood might help generate an experience of Delphi and Jerusalem as alike speaking of God.

However, it may be objected that, while it is an essential part of the *raison d'être* of an art gallery to open viewers to aesthetic experience, it is no part of their role to encourage religious perspectives, still less the possibility of religious experience as such. Certainly, it cannot be any part of a public gallery's function to provide propaganda for a particular faith, but that is rather different from making it possible for the viewer to experience how an explicitly religious dimension might once have worked. To my mind this would seem an integral element

[15] For detailed discussion, see T. Green, *Nicolas Poussin paints the Seven Sacraments twice* (Watchet: Paravail, 2000), 301–310.

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in one key way in which the existence of public galleries is commonly justified, that is in their educational role. It cannot just be a matter of enabling visitors to open themselves to aesthetic values in their present context, it must also include some attempt to carry such visitors back in time so that they can, if they wish, experience the full range of how the painting might once have functioned.

But, if that position is accepted, what then should directors of galleries do? Let me try a weaker and a stronger version of what might be proposed. The first is that, so far as possible, the original conditions of engagement should be replicated. Of course, once such religious background is provided it becomes no longer possible to preclude all impact of those past meanings on present religious thinking and experience. However, that kind of impact would remain an incidental consequence of the more obviously educational purpose that ought to apply in my view to all cases: that viewers ought to be given the opportunity to step into the circumstances that first gave rise to the painting, at least where known.

As a matter of fact, among directors of galleries there has been much greater acceptance of such principles in recent years. Exhibitions at the National Gallery in London, for example, now quite commonly attempt to give, where relevant, more of a sense of the role of paintings as part of an altar complex, for instance temporarily reuniting disparate parts or even artificially creating a more altar-like background. But this can also apply to more permanent displays. So, for example, at Kelvingrove Art Gallery in Glasgow there are two altar-like installations in self-contained rooms, one of which evokes the atmosphere of a Renaissance chapel by providing benches and also suitable music from the time. In the present day, I do think that such *aide-memoires* are necessary, not least to ensure that visitors are reminded of the original context of some of the other paintings of a religious nature in nearby galleries.

Sometimes the same result might be achieved by providing a little more information on the label or in the guidebook. Think, for instance, of *sacra conversazione* pieces where figures from various centuries appear in a nativity or at the foot of the cross. It would help greatly if viewers were told that such compositions do not represent a cavalier attitude to history but rather one widely used method of emphasizing the eternal significance of the drama of Christ's life. Or again reflect how further information might alter appreciation of the variously attributed *Ruskin Madonna* in the National Gallery in Edinburgh.[16] It is so very easy to read such Renaissance works as

[16] www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/V/308.

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rather cloyingly sentimental, whereas the significance attached to Mary looking sadly at the child licking its thumb is transformed once it is seen as a symbolic allusion to the crucifixion.[17] Of course, for many Christians today such a predictive understanding presumes too much knowledge of future events on the part of Mary and her son, but knowing the point of the symbol would at least allow the contemporary believer effectively to engage with the painting, by reflecting on how precisely the child's story should be told.

Or again to take a rather different set of circumstances, the relevant question might be more a matter of the appropriate placing of the painting. So, for example, if designed for an altar, this would seem to demand a corresponding height. I recall once listening to an audio tour in Edinburgh's National Gallery when the then Director, Sir Timothy Clifford, observed that the only way to understand the particular work in question was on one's knees, since it presumed a praying attitude like that in the painting. Again, sometimes we know very precisely what type of approach was expected, with the main figures in Titian's *Pesaro Madonna* turning to face towards us as we, like the principal donor Bishop Jacopo Pesaro, approach the side altar from the left, or Christ's body in Pontormo's *Entombment* being carried towards us out of the painting and into the church's burial vault. As John Shearman puts it, religious pictures of the past were frequently 'transitive', that is, deliberately designed for maximum impact on worshippers by invading their space in specific ways.[18] In both these examples the paintings are of course still in their original setting but again it would be good to see some reflection of such facts, where known, in the new contexts within which similar works now operate.

But what about a stronger claim, that new possibilities of engagement should be created? This has of course sometimes happened as part of the intention of the artists themselves. To give two examples, again from the National Gallery in Edinburgh, Constable's *The Vale of Dedham* almost certainly places a church in the middle of the frame to encourage reflection on God as the God of nature,[19] while it is well known that after his return to the practice of Catholicism Cèzanne

[17] The child has pricked his finger on a thorn, thus alluding to the crown of thorns that he will wear on the cross.

[18] J. Shearman, *Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); For Pontormo, 90–3, fig. 67; For Titian, 99–101, Plate VIII.

[19] Constable was a committed High Anglican. One of his paintings of Salisbury Cathedral was even intended to celebrate divine deliverance of

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repeatedly sketched the mountain Mont Sainte-Victoire as a way of meditating on God's relation with the world.[20] Indeed, the application of such an observation could be greatly extended, for example by inclusion of the many still-life paintings where the aim is essentially religious, most obviously perhaps in those from Spain. As less seems at stake here, though, it is perhaps sufficient to leave viewers to their own devices, not least because that is in effect what the original artists did in offering only implicit clues. As part of an exhibition of several such paintings, viewers would of course quickly see the point.

But let's return to more explicitly religious examples. Take Salvador Dalì's *John of the Cross*, acquired by Glasgow City Council in 1952.[21] In another age it would have gone into a church but Kelvingrove Gallery hung it at the top of one of the main staircases, and it quickly became the most popular painting there.[22] The exalted elevation no doubt helped in conveying its religious significance. Now, after an absence of quite a few years, it has been given a new location, in a specially enclosed space that both encourages contemplation and also gives opportunity to provide, through various media, quite a lot of background information that is both artistic and religious. So, serious attention is given alike to the need for information and the experiential potential of the painting.

More surprisingly perhaps, the same treatment is even occasionally accorded contemporary art. Chris Ofili's *Upper Room* of 2002 would be a case in point.[23] Given that the apostles and even Christ himself were represented as monkeys, perhaps there was an anxiety that the thirteen paintings would not be treated with sufficient seriousness. Added to this was Ofili's now familiar use of elephant dung, with two such lumps coated in resin supporting each painting and a

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the Church of England from the threats implied in the Reform Bill (hence the presence of a rainbow after a storm).

[20] For Constable, www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-z/C/2960. The point about Cèzanne is better perceived by considering the group as a whole.

[21] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_of_Saint_John_of_the_Cross.

[22] Since it was not long after the war, similar reasons could have been at play as with the London Titian discussed earlier, for despite being a crucifixion it carried an optimistic message. My childhood 'memory' of its location may not be quite accurate, as others recall encounters at the end of a long corridor, with that alternative form of distance, though, still providing a sense of mystery.

[23] http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/chris-ofili-upper-room.

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further lump on the painting itself. But, whatever may have influenced the decision, once the work was acquired by Tate Britain in 2005, visitors were directed to travel along a darkened corridor that enjoined silence before they were admitted into the presentation.[24] It was thus easier to be struck not just by the beauty of the paintings but also perhaps by their religious import. Certainly, Ofili has gone on record as declaring that 'religion and belief … are very important … an important part of existence … pushed to the side, once modernism swept in'.[25] The religious dimension is easy to miss, given the unconventional imagery. Ofili is a black man from Manchester now living in Trinidad, and concerned to advance imagery used outside of Britain. Elephant dung is in fact a valued commodity in parts of Africa and India, while the monkey god Hanuman is not only one of India's favourite gods but is also seen as an ideal model disciple of Rama. Within such a frame it ceases to be inconceivable that such paintings could elicit some sense of the presence of the divine.

Before reaching a final conclusion, I now turn to a much briefer treatment of sacred objects in the museum, to examine two further complicating features of the sacred.

3. Sacred Objects in the Museum

First, there is the point that religious believers to varying degrees inhabit a quite different world. Perhaps the point can be brought out most effectively by considering the issues raised by the display of relics in museums, as with famous examples such as the reliquary of St Thomas Becket in the Burrell Collection in Glasgow and that of Columba in the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh. When the former was displayed as part of the Royal Academy exhibition on the *Age of Chivalry* it was displayed as part of an age of which England could be proud. As the accompanying booklet expressed matters, 'the exhibition gathers together for the first time outstanding works of art which demonstrate the creativity and brilliant technical achievements of the English artists of the period'.[26] Although the large souvenir catalogue could scarcely avoid paying some attention to religion, significantly, still little was done to contextualize the

[24] The acquisition was controversial because Ofili was a Tate Trustee at the time. The layout as a whole was designed by the architect, David Adjaye.

[25] *Chris Ofili*, (Illuminations, DVD, 2002).

[26] Booklet accompanying *The Age of Chivalry* (Royal Academy of Arts, 1987).

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artefact in the cult of Becket, or explain how relics functioned in the medieval world. Indeed, the entry on the Becket Reliquary is entirely descriptive, and relics remain unmentioned in the index.[27] Again, before the most recent upgrading of the National Museum of Scotland, the Columba reliquary was treated as part of the general heritage of Scotland rather than with any attention given to its specifically religious dimension.[28] Indeed, that trend was continued in the museum as a whole, with David Livingstone's significance seen exclusively in terms of his role as an explorer: his missionary enterprises went unmentioned. The current approach, however, is quite different with several major galleries now all devoted to the history of religion in Scotland, and with considerable efforts having been made to make earlier religious notions accessible to the modern general public.

Such changes could of course be justified on quite narrow historical grounds, namely simply the important role religion has played in past history. But there is, I think, in fact a fine dividing line here beyond which introduction to a more distinctively religious dimension could also be justified on educational grounds. This concerns the different attitude that once dominated religious thinking. Put simply, Columba and Becket were not thought to be 'dead' absolutely as it were, and so their influence continued into the present through their prayers and other actions, as most obviously was believed to be the case with Columba's relic at the Battle of Bannockburn whose success Robert the Bruce attributed to the presence of Columba himself on the battlefield. Such objects do thus much more than just recall the past. They bring the past into the present, and indeed for some Christians would be thought to continue to do so. That different attitude to time is of course a central feature of all the main religions, seen perhaps most conspicuously within Christianity itself in attitudes to the eucharist, with the recalling of Christ's words and actions at the Last Supper in the communion service (technically known as the *anamnesis*) seen by most Christians as the uniting of Christ's past life and current transcendent reality in his presence with worshippers in the here and now. Occasionally secular attitudes approach a similar perspective, for

[27] J. Alexander and P. Binski (eds), *Age of Chivalry* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1987), 225, no. 87.

[28] Stemming from the 8th century, it is also known as the Monymusk Reliquary and the Brecbennoch.

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example perhaps in attitudes to the Crown Jewels and other trappings of monarchy.[29] But on the whole something rather different is in play.

One recent instance of that difference was the decision of Glasgow City Council in 1999 to return a shirt that had once belonged to one of the three hundred defenceless Indians who had been massacred at Wounded Knee in 1890. Lakota Indians, a branch of the Sioux, they had worn 'ghost shirts' as part of ritual dancing that was supposed to inaugurate a messianic age. Having travelled for a while as part of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, the shirt had eventually been acquired by Glasgow for its new museum. Although Glasgow's decision in 1999 was largely based on a desire to respect universal moral values in honouring the dead (the shirt had been torn off an unburied corpse), it should be emphasized that from the perspective of the Lakota spiritual values were as much in play as moral. Its return was not just a matter of righting wrongs or respecting alternative histories. It had also to do with the restoration of a sanctified presence, of their spirit world now after all achieving some effect in their lives in a restored and cherished dignity. While the general public in Glasgow seems to have been overwhelmingly in favour of the return, some museum experts did object that wider museum values had been unnecessarily violated.[30] It remains an open question, though, whether Lakota objections might have been overcome had the shirt been given a more explicitly religious or spiritual context, and not just note taken of the sufferings involved.

A similar example of repatriation is discussed in an essay by Ivan Gaskell that explores the occasional explicit move back from the museum to an original sacred context,[31] in this case the return in 1998 of seventeen items of dance regalia belonging to the Hupa tribe by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard. As with the Sioux in Glasgow, the dances had religious significance in rituals of renewal and reconciliation. However, in some ways more interesting are his other two examples. One of Russia's best known icons is Our Lady of Vladimir which was moved at the

[29] The comparison is drawn in S. M. Pearce, *Museums, Objects and Collections* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1992), 197–198.

[30] For a detailed account of the controversy, M. O'Neill, 'Repatriation and its Discontents', in E. Robson, L. Treadwell and C. Gosden (eds), *Who Owns Objects? The Ethics and Politics of Collecting Cultural Artefacts* (Oxford: Oxbrow Books, 2005), 105–128. A critique is provided of two experts who objected to the decision, Christian Feest and Julian Spalding.

[31] I. Gaskell, 'Sacred to Profane and Back Again', in A. McClellan (ed), *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millennium* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 149–162.

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Revolution from the Cathedral of the Dormition in Moscow to the Tretyakov Gallery. Following the collapse of Communism, the patriarchate asked for its return but a compromise so far prevails. On key feast days it moves to a secularized church nearby where full veneration is allowed. While under this scenario the sacred still involves a relocation of place, in 1990 Newark Museum agreed to the Dalai Lama dedicating a new altar on its premises for what was seen as a more appropriate setting for the Tibetan sacred objects that the museum possessed. The new structure was created by Tibetans and replaced the imitative feature that the museum had previously used to suggest an altar. Significantly, this entailed that with the altar complex including a consecrated image of the Buddha, the exhibit now served a dual function. In addition to serving the conventional purposes of a museum, it also functioned as a way of mediating to believers the presence of the Buddha.

But then there is a second major difference in religious attitudes that Enlightenment museums with their desire for a single, universal history cannot take into account, and that is the role of tradition in religion. The problem can perhaps best be appreciated if we look closely at the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, founded in Glasgow in 1989 next to the city's medieval cathedral. Its changing exhibitions are quite often excellent as in the series of photographs of religious life in inner-city Birmingham by Liz Hingley that were on display while the Royal Institute of Philosophy's annual conference on Philosophy and Museums was in progress.[32] Its three principal rooms do, however, in my view at least, make it unnecessarily hard for even religious believers to enter into the spirit of what the various artefacts might have been once intended to achieve. It is not that the museum is devoid of fine art. On the contrary, one room has an excellent modern Muslim painting of the God of 99 Names, and another a fine medieval Nataraja, that is, Shiva as the Lord of the Dance. But in those two rooms they sit alongside very different imagery from other religions including Christianity, while in the third very crowded room there is an illustrated outline of how the principal stages of life are marked in each of the major religions but all mixed up together.

The intention is undoubtedly good, of encouraging greater mutual understanding between the religions, especially in respect of what they have in common. Yet I am unconvinced that this is the best way of going about it since specific contexts are transcended even before they are discovered. In large part the problem lies in the

[32] *Under Gods: Stories from the Soho Road*, 19th January – 28th July, 2013.

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restricted amount of space available within which to show the various artefacts. Even so, little seems to have been done to think through the effect of such a close juxtaposition, for what is lacking in consequence is any real encouragement for visitors to think themselves imaginatively into another's religion, and not least the significantly different use to which art is put in each. By this I mean not just the mere fact of different symbols but the often radically different attitudes towards them. Thus a Christian is unlikely to understand Islamic art until its strong iconoclastic side is appreciated, just as, at the other extreme, Hinduism will be misunderstood until its opposing strategy is acknowledged, in a sheer surfeit of images being deployed to underline the relativization of them all.

A number of museums like St Mungo's now exist across the world. An interesting instance is one of Buddhist inspiration in Taipei on the island of Taiwan.[33] The Venerable Dharma Master Hsin Tao raised $ 66 million to found a Museum of World Religions that was opened in 2001 in a building designed by the well-known American exhibition architect, Ralph Appelbaum. It has a mixture of rooms with shared themes and others where distinctive elements are allowed full play. Intriguingly, in order to engender the right kind of approach to the exhibits, visitors are encouraged, as they enter, to place their hands on a wall of water and let the water bathe their hands before they proceed along a mist-filled hallway that has pilgrimage scenes from the various religions projected on its walls. Presumably, the hope is that, whatever religion is the focus of a particular moment, something of its implied holiness might still be conveyed, if it is approached in the right kind of spirit that such an anointing is intended to inculcate. Although St Mungo's has a Zen Garden at its entrance with possibly the same end in view, it is probably not a realistic prospect to hope that such an approach could work in the secularized west. Nonetheless, some effort could be made, for example by ensuring that Muslim rugs or *mirhabs* face the right direction or again some explanation be provided of why the anatomy of the Buddha can take such different forms, or, perhaps more importantly, how his various gestures are meant to function. In other words, putting all of this in more explicitly theological language, it would be good to see visitors given the chance to at least appreciate, if not experience, the very different means by which divine grace is presumed to be mediated through such diverse strategies. But the point can perhaps be put most clearly by returning to St Mungo's Museum and noting the current juxtaposition of a Christian portrayal

[33] For further details, see www.mwr.org.tw.

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of acute suffering on the cross and a Muslim abstract representation of the God of ninety-nine names.[34] Precisely because the latter is non-representational, the ordinary Christian viewer is unlikely to see the point, while according to the Qur'an Christianity goes seriously astray in supposing that God would ever abandon one of his prophets to such extremes of suffering. So, further help is obviously required.

Before concluding one last argument against taking the religious content of the past more seriously needs to be mentioned, and that is that, even if the purpose is seen as primarily educational, implicit encouragement to religion is still given, and that can be no part of the function of a museum or gallery. This seems to me a very odd argument since over the course of their history such institutions have in fact strayed quite far from pure objectivity, and given encouragement to a whole range of attitudes, of which we would now disapprove, including most obviously triumphant nationalism, neglect of the perspectives of the poor and enslaved, as well as what now might well be seen as contentious and contested histories of art.[35] Some, such as the Art Institute of Chicago, have in recent years conscientiously sought to rectify such bias by giving more space, for example, to art by blacks and women. But my point is that total objectivity is an impossible ideal. Instead, balance is best achieved by allowing a number of competing perspectives.

4. Conclusion

Neil MacGregor has remarked on how often he has observed individuals praying before paintings or artefacts in his various places of employment.[36] Should that necessarily be a source of worry to artistic directors? We have the Enlightenment to thank for the origin of museums and for the principle of tolerance. It would be a shame if all tolerance was taken to mean was indifference rather than

[34] Currently a Peter Howson crucifixion hangs in the first room. Previously the Christian painting on display was still a crucifixion but a much more optimistic one by Craigie Aitchison in which the suffering was much less explicit. At least while it was Aitchison on view, for the Muslim the resultant conflict and tension would not have been quite so acute.

[35] The point is developed by both Pearce in *Museums, Objects and Collections* (op. cit.) and by Tony Bennett in *The Birth of the Museum* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[36] Director of the National Gallery in London (1987–2002) and from 2002 Director of the British Museum.

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encouraging and promoting respect for difference. The latter is undoubtedly something that could be fostered by art galleries and museums, if every effort was made to present visitors with the reality of a quite different religious past into which they might nonetheless sympathetically enter. This is not necessarily to claim that the beliefs that characterized such a past are true, only that a proper appreciation of that past could greatly enhance the contribution that galleries and museums might make to mutual understanding in the multiculturalism of the present day.

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