Weir, Todd , and Lieke Wijnia , ed. The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Heritage in Contemporary Europe. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Bloomsbury Handbooks. Bloomsbury Handbooks. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 8 Jan. 2024. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350251410>.

Accessed from: www.bloomsburycollections.com

Accessed on: Mon Jan 08 2024 15:16:00 Central European Standard Time

Copyright © Birgit Meyer. Todd H. Weir, Lieke Wijnia, and contributors 2024. This chapter is published open access subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). You may re-use, distribute, and reproduce this work in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Chapter 2

What is Religious—about—Heritage?

BIRGIT MEYER

Certain tangible and intangible matters from the past are preserved as heritage for the future, while many more fall into oblivion or are disposed of as waste. Rather than being "given," heritage-making depends on an authorizing frame that selects certain objects and vests them with a value. They are deemed worthy to be kept, maintained (even at high costs), and transmitted to subsequent generations. The preservation of certain valuables—such as holy buildings, relics, images, objects, or books—is a long-standing feature of religious traditions. And so is the destruction of heritage—be it to assault religious others or to mark a break with one's own religious past—in acts of iconoclasm. Heritage-making and breaking are intrinsic to religion.

The religion-heritage nexus became more complex in Europe's "secular age" (Taylor 2007), in which religious affiliation is a matter of personal choice while the state has the power to regulate religious institutions by curtailing their direct involvement in state affairs and protecting their right to worship. Heritage arose as a new, secular category that was employed by modern nation-states to instill a sense of authentic belonging and cohesion among citizens. Indebted to the "migration of the holy" (Bossy 1985; see Isnart and Cerezales 2020: 1–3) from the church to the modern nation-state, heritage is a resource employed by modern states for the genesis of common values, civil religion, and political theologies.

How heritage differs from, yet also contains, and continues religion is an important issue for research. The challenge is to think through how heritage, as a secular category, is heir to, yet also transcends, religion. Doing so opens fresh possibilities to explore the transfiguration of religious elements into the secular realm. Has heritage, after the "death of God" proclaimed by Nietzsche, become a placeholder for religion, offering a new secular-sacred (Balkenhol, van den Hemel, and Stengs 2020)—for instance, in the form of a flag, a national monument, or a house of parliament—that is invoked for the sake of grounding identities in appealing, or even awe-inspiring, matters transmitted from the past? How can the study of heritage along this line open up deeper insights into the resilience of the sacred and its survival in secular forms (Kearney 2015)?

Acknowledging that heritage is harnessed to produce a new secular-sacred, however, should not make us forget that in the secular age, religion—in the sense of institutions that provide a set of practices and ideas geared to a meta-empirical sphere, and followers who live these practices and believe that sphere to exist, albeit to varying degrees of participation, intensity, and conviction—does not disappear. Contrary to what one might assume on the basis of a superficial understanding of secularization as implying the decline of religion and the concomitant rise of heritage as the prime secular resource for identity formation, in modern societies, heritage and religion exist side by side. The category "religious heritage" around which this volume evolves testifies to the enduring relevance of religion—on multiple levels—to the formation of heritage in our time. Given that heritage operates in a secular regime (Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2013) of explicit and implicit rules and regulations implemented by monument boards, heritage institutions, and museums, the question arises what the attribute religious *does* to heritage and, conversely, what the noun heritage *does* to the religious things it sets out to preserve. What happens when religious things are transferred from a religious to a secular regime? How *religious* is "religious heritage"? How *secular* does religious heritage become in the process of its heritagization? To what extent might a secular museum accommodate the sacrality of items with a religious provenance?

I propose to address the questions arising around religious heritage from a material approach (Meyer 2012) that takes things as an intrinsic and constitutive aspect of both religion and heritage. This approach enables us to analyze religion and heritage not simply as abstract categories but as actual institutionalized regimes that work with the same material forms, yet according to the ways of their respective institutions and logics. From this angle, it is possible to explore in detail how particular things are valued and handled in both regimes, as well as to trace the implications of their transition from one regime to the other—be it a Renaissance statue of Mary that moves from church to museum, or a *Nkisi* figure taken from the mission field in Africa into an ethnographic collection.

How does such a transition affect the "cult value" of a religious object that is put on display for its "exhibition value" (Benjamin 1999 [orig. 1936])? To what extent does the heritage regime into which religious objects are transposed neutralize their religious value (and power) or, conversely, revitalize it in a new manner? In other words, how resilient is the religious dimension—enshrined in the "cult value"—in the frame of heritage? In the following I will address these questions by turning, first, to the move of religious objects into the domain of heritage and, second, to the accommodation of heritage in the domain of religion. While I find it illuminating to distinguish between religion and heritage as regimes that value and handle the very same thing differently, my aim is not to insist on their separateness, but to explore how they fold into and possibly mess up each other. In this way, I hope to spell out some of the challenges ensued by the category of religious heritage, which this volume is all about.

Heritage and Religion

Throughout time and across the globe, religious traditions begin, transform, dissipate, and eventually end (Stausberg, Wright, and Cusack 2020), and—perhaps—become recognized as heritage along the way or as a second career. European museums are filled with the sacred things of extinct religions from, for instance, ancient Egypt, Greece, or the Roman Empire. Long taken to represent the cradle of the Occident, they are now claimed, alongside sites such as Machu Picchu or Angkor Wat, as instances of the universal heritage of humankind. Museums also display Christian statues and images that came to be valued as high art, yet originated "before the era of art," when art and religion were not separated in the same way as is the case in our time (Belting 1994). Moreover, museums display objects and figures from indigenous religious traditions that were appropriated through looting, trade, or missionary work during the colonization of the Global South. Mission societies, in particular, were keen to assemble what they perceived as "fetishes" and "idols" so as to document the triumphant superiority of Christianity over "heathendom" (Jacobs, Knowles, and Wingfried 2015). While the term religious heritage may apply to all these instances, in Europe—especially in the Netherlands, where approximately one church closes per week—it gained prominence in relation to the current, rather dramatic process of decline of Christianity as a "lived" religion and its rise as a resource for heritage formation.

Currently, there is a great deal of Christian "waste"—defunct buildings, crucifixes, monstrances, reliquaries, and images of Mary, Jesus, or Saints who lost their original users—that is reframed as religious heritage. The attribute "religious" refers to their past rather than their present use. In the same vein, the current claims laid to Europe's Christian (or even "Judeo-Christian") heritage and the concomitant heritagization of Christianity do not require active belief and participation in a Christian church. The point is that things qualified as religious heritage fall into the domain of secular heritage, with its own custodians, logics, and regimes for preservation and display (see also Burchardt 2020: 155–97). Exactly for this reason, the state and other secular instances can invest in its upkeep without trespassing the proverbial separation of church and state, in a way that would be more difficult to implement if the material forms would still be part of the regime of a church. Employing heritage as a secular frame allows to bestow value on churches and other Christian things as relevant to society even though the churches themselves are shrinking and people are losing their faith (see Meyer 2019: 70). In the same vein, museums are not bound to treat items from the Christian past in a religious manner, even though they may opt to show some courtesy, just as the reuse of former churches by new secular owners is sought to occur in a respectful, befitting manner, so as to respect the religious history of the building and the sentiments it still evokes (Reinstra and Strolenberg 2020: 15–17). The idea is that Christian sacred buildings and things may be deconsecrated, but not be desecrated.

As part of a secular heritage regime, heritage institutions and museums have the possibility to engage with formerly Christian things in their own manner. They can take the risk to trigger a sense of offense in (Christian) visitors or even charges of blasphemy, as was the case with the exhibition *Recycling Jesus* (2017) in the Noordbrabants Museum that displayed all sorts of artworks made of discharged and defunct Christian material forms (Meyer 2019: 75–81). Such playful work with the "sacred waste" (Stengs 2014) left behind as material reminders of the decline of Christianity spotlights the extent to which religious heritage has been severed from its Christian roots and thus become effectively secularized. At the same time, beholders may feel offended because they do not experience these Christian material forms as artworks or heritage, but as sacred things that were mistreated or even desecrated in the process of being reframed as art and heritage (Kruse, Meyer, and Korte 2018; Verrips 2008).

These sensibilities indicate that the process of heritagizing religion is not as smooth a transition from a religious to a secular regime as one might think. As pointed out by Crispin Paine (2013), religious objects in museums are not easily subsumed fully under a secular regime. Museums in the UK, he reports, have opened up possibilities to engage in devotional viewing on the part of those visitors for whom the objects are part of their living faith. The question how to deal with such objects—regarding preservation, display, and the ways in which visitors are invited to engage with them—is a matter debated hotly in heritage and museum circles. The urgency to address this issue is enhanced by the increasing religious plurality of European societies due to migration, with many people from former colonies now standing face-to-face with items from their religious world on display in a museum. They may not apprehend these items as instances of religious heritage displayed in a secular frame, but as religious in their own right, and possibly call for a more befitting treatment or their repatriation. For instance, I am currently conducting research on a missionary collection of *legba* figures (so-called "fetishes") and *dzokawo* (so-called "charms") from the Ewe in current-day Togo and Ghana that were handed to the Übersee-Museum Bremen by Protestant missionaries active among this group around the turn of the twentieth century (Meyer 2021). In this context, I spoke to a contemporary Ewe priest in Ghana and showed him some photographs of these figures and objects in the depot. For him, they were likely to be alive and hungry, eagerly awaiting to be called by a priest and fed. He found it problematic to leave these items in the limbo of the depot and cared about their state and whereabouts.

It would lead too far here to explore such cases in more detail. The point I want to make is that in the transition from the regime of religion to that of heritage, things do not necessarily lose their "cult value" in favor of a new, secular "exhibition value." Instead, their display may trigger all sorts of responses that insist on the original use of these things as mediators of the divine or the spirit world, and thus feel offended by their present secular display. So, the qualification of things as religious heritage may well imply that their religious value, meaning, and power survive in a secular frame. This frame appears to be unable—or perhaps is not even intended—to fully neutralize their religiosity. This resilience—or "sacred residue" (Beekers 2016)—may even be the main reason for the continuing value and appeal of religious things in the secular heritage domain.

Religion and Heritage

As pointed out in the beginning, heritage—in the sense of passing on tangible and intangible matters from the past to subsequent generations—is an intrinsic part of religion. This being so, how do religious traditions relate to heritage in the secular age, when religion and heritage are differentiated into separate domains? Examples abound that show that religious institutions—with the Roman Catholic Church at the vanguard—accommodate the heritage frame easily and successfully. Just think about the plenitude of churches in Rome that host exquisite artworks by Bellini, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, or Raphael, and combine offering services to Catholic believers and display their artworks for tourists. In contrast to a secular museum, certain rules and restrictions, for instance with regard to dress codes, apply. The Roman Catholic Church also runs the Vatican Museum, with the Sistine Chapel as its supreme highlight. Certain concerns about the negative impact of mass tourism on Catholic art works notwithstanding, the Church clearly takes pride in the fact that its rich devotional material culture simultaneously features as secular heritage that appeals to worldly beholders and art lovers. It has a long-standing expertise in negotiating the copresence of believers and tourists who all feel attracted to the same artefacts, albeit partly for different reasons. What does religious heritage mean in this setting? My hunch is that here the capacity of Christianity, especially the Roman Catholic tradition, to bring forth masterpieces that are recognized from the secular angle of heritage and art is emphasized, while at the same time claims are laid to the religious roots of presumably secular heritage.

The accommodation of heritage, as a secular frame, also occurs in the Netherlands, where, next to many churches being closed down (about one each week), remaining congregations open their doors for other, non-religious purposes and users. One prominent example for this trend is the project Dutch Museum Churches launched by the Museum Catharijneconvent in 2017. Spotlighting the beauty and artistic value of fifteen "religiously active" churches (plus two synagogues) across the Netherlands that would deserve a "Michelin Star," this project seeks to appeal to tourists interested to witness religious heritage in situ (https://www.grootstemuseum.nl/en/). This initiative resonates with the broader trend of the reframing of Christianity as religious heritage, which is deemed important for Dutch national identity, even and especially for those who do not see themselves as Christian believers any longer. Right-wing populist movements also tend to embrace Christianity as a culturalized form (Balkenhol and van den Hemel 2019).

De-churching implies the refashioning of Christianity as religious heritage in a secular frame. Many congregations are able to survive and generate sufficient funds for the upkeep of their buildings, by sharing the building with secular instances that are attracted to the space. As the latter use it in their own terms as an exhibition venue or a concert hall, the congregations are to negotiate which activities are compatible with their religious convictions and uses of space, and which are not. As Elza Kuyk shows in her research on common interests and tensions between multiple users of the same church building (2017, 2019), the framing of a church as religious heritage may ultimately hamper the religious life of the congregation, yet also be the sole condition under which the use of the building as a church can be retained. Framing a church and its interior as religious heritage means that more parties are able to claim it and have a say with regard to its use and maintenance. In this sense, the study of the embracement of religious heritage offers a prime instance to study Christian negotiations of the secularity of Christianity in its heritagized form.

While the Netherlands offer a rather dramatic example of de-churching and the rise of Christian heritage in its wake, it is important to realize that the negotiation of the category of heritage by religious groups occurs across the world, enhanced by the global heritage industry and tourism. Events such as the voodoo festival in Benin (Ciarcia 2020) or the activities of Brazilian Candomblé terreiros to open up to outside visitors and found museums, actively embrace the category of heritage (Adinolfi and Van de Port 2013). These are intriguing examples of the global currency of religious heritage. The use of this category by religious groups is part of their attempt to assert public presence and gain esteem—certainly important for the protagonists of vodou and Candomblé who have long been demonized by Christian and secular authorities.

So, for all sorts of reasons and from various angles, religious institutions embrace the secular category of religious heritage. The fact that they operate in a religious regime that has the power to sacralize religious things to act as harbingers of the unseen does not preclude the incorporation of their sites and artefacts into the secular frame of religious heritage, or the running of museums (Orzech 2020). Doing so not only opens up new opportunities to speak to a broader, secular audience but also comes with its own problems—especially with regard to the negotiation of access to the sacred and its protection against profanization.

To Conclude

The category of religious heritage appears to be an intriguing hybrid. While heritage is secular, it contains things from the religious domain that still carry along their previous religious or "cult" value. This containment, through which the original religious identity of heritagized things is still present, suggests that secularization is not a linear but rather a dialectical process (Weigel 2017). Religious heritage retains and remains indebted to the religious dimension of the things that are heritagized; the noun "heritage" is haunted by the attribute "religious," which cannot be fully contained but serves as a reminder of the "real" religion from which the heritagized religious things originate. This opens up for the possibility of reversibility, as the examples of desecrated church buildings in post-socialist Eastern Europe that are in the process of being reconsecrated or that of the Hagia Sofia that has just been turned from museum to mosque, show plastically.

Studying religious heritage exposes the indebtedness of the secular to the religious in the past and present and holds open all sorts of possible futures. Conversely, the adoption of the category religious heritage by religious institutions and groups as a way of self-representation possibly limits their power to confine their sacred things and sites to the regime of religion and protect them against profanization and pollution. The embracement of the secular frame of heritage may turn out to be a Trojan horse for religious institutions, which induces them to incorporate a secular logic into the heart of religion and makes them lose control over their religious things (Kuyk 2023).

What we call religious heritage enshrines a complex entanglement of religion and heritage that can play out in multiple ways. Exactly for this reason, it forms such a suitable entry point for the study of religion beyond a facile view of secularization in terms of religious decline. Calling scholars to pay detailed attention to things, the study of religious heritage is not only a privileged field to study the conversion of Christianity into heritage but also the conversion of religious objects from colonized people into musealized objects in colonial collections (Modest 2017). While a likely future for Christianity in Europe may lie in its being recast as heritage, the objects in colonial collections on display in exhibitions or kept in depots may call for being reanimated and brought back into a religious regime. In all these investigations, the pursual of the question what is religious—about—heritage will lead us into the complex entanglement of religion and heritage, in which neither the regime of religion nor of heritage is able to fully contain the material things they protect and display.

Acknowledgment

With thanks to Elza Kuyk, Irene Stengs, and Pooyan Tamimi Arab for their stimulating comments on an earlier version of this essay.

References

Adinolfi, M. P., and M. van de Port (2013), ‘‘Bed and Throne: The ‘Museumification’ of the Living Quarters of a Candomblé Priestess,” *Material Religion* 9 (3): 282–303.

Balkenhol, M., E. van den Hemel, and I. Stengs (2020), *The Secular Sacred: Emotions of Belonging and the Perils of Nation and Religion*. Cham: Palgrave.

Balkenhol, M., and E. van den Hemel (2019), "Bedfellows, New Alliances: The Politics of Religion, Cultural Heritage and Identity in the Netherlands," *Trajecta: Religie, Cultuur en Samenleving in de Nederlanden* 28 (1): 117–41.

Beekers, D. (2016), "Sakrale Residuen/Sacred Residue," in S. Lanwerd (ed.), *The Urban Sacred—Städtisch-Religiöse Arrangements in Amsterdam, Berlin Und London/How Religion Makes and Takes Place in Amsterdam, Berlin and London. Ausstellungskatalog/Exhibition Catalogue*, 36–41. Berlin: Metropol.

Belting, H. (1994), *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Bendix, R. F., A. Eggert, and A. Peselmann (2013), "Introduction: Heritage Regimes and the State," in R. F. Bendix, A. Eggert, and A Peselmann (eds.), *Heritage Regimes and the State*, 11–20. Göttingen: Göttingen University Press.

Benjamin, W. (1999), "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in H. Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, 211–44. London: Pimlico.

Burchardt, M. (2020), *Regulating Difference: Religious Diversity and Nationhood in the Secular West*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Ciarcia, G. (2020), "Contemporary Vodun Memories of the Slave Trade Past in Southern Benin," in C. Isnart and N. Cerezales (eds.), *The Religious Heritage Complex: Legacy, Conservation, and Christianity*, 157–72. London: Bloomsbury.

Isnart, C., and N. Cerezales (2020), "Introduction," in C. Isnart and N. Cerezales (eds.), *The Religious Heritage Complex: Legacy, Conservation, and Christianity*, 1–13. London: Bloomsbury.

Jacobs, K., C. Knowles, and C. Wingfield (2015), *Trophies, Relics and Curios? Missionary Heritage from Africa and the Pacific*. Leiden: Sidestone Press.

Kearney, R. (2015), *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God with James Wood, Catherine Keller, Charles Taylor, Julia Kristeva, Gianni Vattimo, Simon Critchley, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, David Tracy, Jens Zimmermann, and Merold Westphal*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Kruse, C., B. Meyer, and A. Korte (eds.) (2018), *Taking Offense: Religion, Art, and Visual Culture in Plural Configurations*. München: Fink Verlag.

Kuyk, E. (2017), "Multiple Used Church Buildings and Religious Communities," *Religious Matters*, September 6. https://religiousmatters.nl/multiple-used-church-buildings-and-religious-communities/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

Kuyk, E. (2019), "Wie beschermt de Oude Kerk in Amsterdam," *Religious Matters*, November 26. https://religiousmatters.nl/wie-beschermt-de-oude-kerk-in-amsterdam/ (accessed November 15, 2021).

Kuyk, E. (2023), *Tussen erfgoed en eredienst. Meervoudig gebruik van vier monumentale stadskerken*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Meyer, B. (2012), *Mediation and the Genesis of Presence. Towards a Material Approach to Religion*. Utrecht: Utrecht University Press.

Meyer, B. (2019), "Recycling the Christian Past. The Heritagization of Christianity and National Identity in the Netherlands," in R. Buikema, A. Buyse, and A. Robben (eds.), *Culture, Citizenship and Human Rights*, 64–88. London: Routledge.

Meyer, B. (2021), "Legba-Figures and Dzokawo. Unpacking a Missionary Collections in the Übersee-Museum Bremen," July 9. https://boasblogs.org/dcntr/legba-figures-and-dzokawo/ (accessed May 31, 2023).

Modest, W. (2017), "Pressing Matter: Reckoning with Colonial Heritage," Inaugural lecture, November 7, VU University, Amsterdam.

Orzech, C. (2020), *Museums of World Religions: Displaying the Divine, Shaping Cultures*. London: Bloomsbury.

Paine, C. (2013), *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*. London: Bloomsbury.

Reinstra, A., and F. Strolenberg (eds.) (2020), *Kerkgebouwen: 88 inspirerende voorbeelden van nieuw gebruik: van appartement tot zorgcomplex*. Wageningen: Uitgeverij Blauwdruk, Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed.

Stausberg, M., C. M. Cusack, and S. A. Wright (eds.) (2020), *The Demise of Religion: How Religions End, Die, or Dissipate*. New York: Bloomsbury.

Stengs, I. (2014), "Sacred Waste," *Material Religion* 10 (2): 235–8.

Taylor, C. (2007), *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap.

Verrips, J. (2008), "Offending Art and the Sense of Touch," *Material Religion* 4 (2): 204–25.

Weigel, S. (2017), "Blasphemy and Infamy: On the Dialectics of Secularization in Visual Politics of Desecration and Defamation," Presentation Workshop, "Blasphemies": Media, History, Affect, Paris, May 29–30.