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Religion, Museums and the Modern World

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“In contemporary pluralist societies, museums mark the crossroads of many cultural worlds; and appear as ambivalent centres both of cultural refuge and new modes of cultural existence. The museum stands for other worlds, which are assembled ...within them.” (Sullivan, 2006:53)

Introduction

The above comment suggests that museums are places in which cultures come together equally to interpret, promote or reinforce ideas about societies. In terms of religious museums (or museums which also include some religious artefacts) this implies a paradigm shift in the ways religion is interpreted or permitted to be interpreted within the modern world. This paper will first consider relevant literature highlighting changing attitudes to religion and how this potentially impacts on museums. It will then offer arguments as to why there are very few museums of world faith with the St. Mungo Museum, Glasgow, The State Museum of the History of Religion (MHR), St. Petersburg and the Museum of World Religions (MWR), Taiwan being the key sites considered here. It will then look at the origins of these museums, how they present faiths and will focus on the key case study of the Museum of World Religions (MWR), Taiwan. Lastly

the potential future of the museum as religious site or places in which to discover religion will be explored.

Religion and society

All societies are structured round belief systems and shared ideas and values. Whilst the relationship of religion to state will vary, societies that are based on religious principles off necessity reflect a world view that is shaped and imposed by the requirements of that faith creating ‘powerful, persuasive and long lasting moods and motivations’ in individuals (Geertz, 1966:63). Until the 1920’s it was assumed that religion was influenced by environment but did not shape it but Weber argued the need to look at religion’s influence on society (Kong, 1990). As this relationship between church and state has broken down in many societies and/or the role of religion superseded by political and social values, individuals are often free to select (or de-select) religion or to construct (or deconstruct) a faith that suits their lifestyles. When societies belief systems reflected accepted ‘truths’ there was no expectation that the individual would seek to challenge such truths. Religions were usually based on a unique set of long held historical beliefs (Hampson, 2002). In late modernity ideas about objective truths and indeed the role of his-

tory have been challenged and the essential uniqueness of faith which made all others idolatrous has given way in many cases to an acceptance that all faiths offer values, aims and ideals which can be adapted to the individuals needs rather than societies will. Despite a growing secularisation worldwide it has been argued that there is a resurgence of fundamentalist faiths and a re-embracing of faith in certain sectors of society either in a direct relationship with the state as in Islam or as a consequence of the removal of state interference in the right to worship as in the U.S.S.R (Kong, 1990:355) An example of this is the Christian Apologetics Research and Evangelism (CARE) Ministries in Winnipeg, Canada, who are considering opening a museum '*explaining the course of human history - from a creationist perspective*' (<http://atheism.about.com/b/a/005951.htm>) arguing against the scientific acceptance of Darwinism taught in most schools.

Religion, which in some cases may be determined as a sense of spirituality, provides a framework from which to derive comfort from societies ails and personal hardship. It helps individuals to make sense of suffering, '*how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat or the helpless contemplation of other's agony something bearable*' (Geertz, 1966:71).

There is a decline of formal religion as a way of shaping our identity. In for example Christian Britain this is also evidenced as a decline of the culture that '*formally conferred Christian identity on the British people*' (Brown 2001:193) to the extent that '*Britain is showing the world how religion as we have known it can die*' (Brown, 2001:198) A key question is whether the absence of formal (or forced) faith results in a 'gap' in people's sense of themselves as spiritual beings and whether this gap means that people might be less well emotionally equipped to make sense of the senseless in this world – violence, poverty and pain. If so what are the ways that people seek to address this? For some theorists the answer lies in the need or right of the indi-

vidual to create and recreate for him/herself a way of being in a fragmented world where we are less likely to hold a fixed viewpoint based on religious beliefs yet still need to have a sense of identity (Brown, 2001). Nor does the decline of formal or fixed faith necessarily mean that people have lost their belief in god or a higher power. In the culture of the individual people are having to self-reflect and ask '*Who am I? Where am I from? What will become of me?....as postmodernism casts doubt on the value of the meta-narrative.....leading to the question of identity: who am I?*' (Smith, 2000:1)

Indeed it is suggested by Smart that the loss of identity is due to changes in society, which is in itself in part due to loss of religion, may be a reason people seek out a new religion. In late modernity where belief and doubt can co-exist (Derrida 1998), and the commitment to one faith is not a necessary requirement of society, then people may voluntarily return to religion in a '*post-religious*' or '*quasi-religious*' way and '*outside of formal structures secularity and spirituality will, in future begin to coexist more easily as boundaries become increasingly blurred*' (Devereux and Carnegie, 2006:48). Religion in a pluralist society may be viewed as an expression of personal growth. This religious observance may even lead to people having their own faith with only one member. (Smart 2002). People may well favour those elements of faith that allow for a stronger sense of individuality and self expression although individuality still needs to be constructed in a social framework (Attfield, 2000) suggesting individuals still feel the need to belong in society.

Another argument might be that as people become more exposed to the faith(s) of the other there is the potential to break down cultural and race barriers leading to a universal religion. Religion is one of the ways that we define people in society even in a largely post-religious culture. For example people are asked for their religion when they go into hospital; apply for job, and on many other forms in the public arena. In some

cases this can lead to racism and dissent. Loy and Watts (1998) argue that the loss of a fixed point of faith which forced a rejection of other religions breaks down racism. However pluralist societies are still likely to have social and political divides and a dominant culture (Kong, 1990). People are open to different experiences learning about and indeed visiting more than just the monotheistic religious sites but also the sites of the 'other' and 'new age' spaces (Shackley, 2001). The ways in which individuals seek to source ideas about faith or faiths may also change as information is available on web sites and in alternative religious spaces or in museums as secular containers of religious knowledge.

Religion in the museum

There are many museums which are devoted to the material culture of one faith. These are likely to be attached to religious buildings although often they make little attempt to interpret the tenets of that faith and often fail to attract audiences who are not already committed to that faith. One such development within Bradford Cathedral, England was developed with over one million pounds worth of Millennium funding. It is clear though that the museum's remit was to reach a multi-faith audience from within a Christian space and perspective and this simply did not work. In the words of the head of the steering group:

"We reasoned that if we could attract more visitors to the Cathedral, we would be advancing our mission as a place of pilgrimage, and helping people discover their own spiritual realities..... presenting Jesus in and to a city where cultures collide, diverse faiths are practised and poverty in all its manifestations is to be seen etched deeply into people's faces" (Smith, 2000:1).

The museum did highlight other faiths but from the perspective of the 'dominant culture' as discussed earlier and people were not pre-

pared to pay to visit and it closed within months having failed to attract many visitors.

Despite the fact that religion has been one of the key defining factors of cultures there are very few museums which actually interpret multi-faith in the way that the opening quote implies. It is not simply that most do not give equal consideration to different faiths but also that in very many cases museums do not interpret objects in a way that allows their religious meaning or value to be understood as the following quote highlights.

"There are... millions of religious objects in museums, as most fine art anthropology, archaeology, historical and general museums have a high percentage of objects which had a significant religious meaning to their owners and creators' (yet)... 'the majority of objects are either anaesthetised as art icons or treated by curators as evidence of the exotic beliefs of people's remote in time, place or culture....'" (O'Neill, 1996:189)

In part this is a consequence of increased secularisation and it can be reasoned that this secularisation led to religious objects from contemporary society being interpreted for their aesthetic or folk values. This suggests that they have been rendered powerless by the museum at the expense of the deep meanings that they have or had within societies – or indeed the emotions that they inspired. Work on the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art confirmed that there were real concerns that such a museum would be unpalatable or even dangerous for a number of reasons. Central of those being that individuals require that their religion should offer a unique experience that would not necessarily render all other faiths idolatrous and therefore they could not be compared. Comparative religion as an academic mode of study had little support within the religions themselves. Although galleries have traditionally been freer to challenge religious values and attitudes through art this is clearly a sensitive time globally and the Tate Britain, London removed a controversial work 'God is Great' composed of religious texts

representing Christianity, Judaism and Islam immediately after the July 2005 London bombings as they feared it would cause offence. This was done against the artist John Latham's wishes (*Observer*, 2005)

It can be argued then that museums, whilst not ideologically or politically impartial, reflect society rather than lead it. Changing attitudes to religion in the world have allowed for, or even forced museums to review the way their collections of artefacts which have religious relevance and resonance are displayed and interpreted.

A museum of religion in this paper then is one which can be defined as a collection of objects, ephemera, photographs and texts relating to more than one religion and representing the belief systems of more than one country but which also interprets the religious meaning of objects in displays. All of the museums of world faith being considered here offer an interpretation of faiths across the world although from different perspectives. One of the key questions to be debated is whether the inclusion of religious objects as religious objects creates a religious space out of a museum space. Sullivan, director of the Harvard University Centre for the Study of World Religions challenges '*How do religious concerns act as catalysts for change in considering the ownership, exhibition and care of religiously charged material?*' (Sullivan, 2001:550). The museum then becomes a centre for 'social discourse' rather than passive viewing. In order to address this question some consideration needs to be given to the museums of religion that exist within the world. What is their role and purpose in society? Before considering the Museum of World Religions in Taiwan some attention will now be to the aims and origins of two other contrasting museums of world faith.

The Museum of History of Religion, St Petersburg

One of the first museums of world religion, the State Museum of the History of Religion

which is 75 years old in 2007, was initially housed in the cathedral in St Petersburg. Its existence was due to the changing relationship of church to state and therefore was intended for the dissemination of anti-religious propaganda (Koutchinsky, 2006:156). As attitudes and political ideologies changed so also did its title being known firstly as the Museum of Atheism, then the Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism and latterly the 'and Atheism' part of the title has been removed. From the onset though it set out to collect religious artefacts from across the world not just to create an anti-religious museum based on Orthodox faith but with the key aim of developing '*a historical and religious establishment*' for the study of '*religious typology, of religion as a cultural phenomenon, and of religion as a part of ideology*'. (Koutchinsky, 2006:156). Collections were augmented over time by material that came out of closed churches and which often formed the basis of other museums of anti-religion. The Museum of the History of Religion survived and indeed has flourished as a centre of scholarship and recently moved to new purpose built premises in St Petersburg and currently has some 30 plus curatorial staff looking after some 180,000 objects. This is wholly secular museum although visitors can bring their own sense of religiosity to the displays.

The St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow

Unlike the MHR, which is based on a scholastic interpretation of objects the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art took the premise that many of the world's most beautiful, awe inspiring or emotionally moving and powerful objects were created in the name of god or gods and as an expression of faith. Such objects reflected human creativity at its best and occasionally human destructiveness at its worst. The museum opened in 1993 and aimed to be a space where people of 'all faiths and none' could ex-

plora a snapshot of religion in the world today. It was formed in response to the Friends of the Cathedral asking Glasgow's local government for support to finish a visitor centre adjacent to the protestant cathedral. The council took over the development of the building and determined that a museum devoted only to one faith and a protestant version of that faith was too narrow a remit for contemporary and multi-faith society. At the same time Glasgow Museums acknowledged that many of their objects had a religious meaning that had been lost or under-interpreted in displays. Many such objects were languishing in stores. The museum devotes most of its space to what are acknowledged to be the six main world faiths: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism. Other faiths and belief systems are included for example Australian Dreamtime or ancestral worship within small scale societies. The museum is very much object led and some faiths have proved difficult to reach or to interpret and staff actively seek to source objects from faiths who wish to be represented. It succeeds in creating a safe, welcoming and calm space in which individuals can explore their own responses to the displays. Glasgow as a post-industrial city has long been troubled by sectarianism with tensions between Catholics and Protestants and the museum provides the opportunity to explore ways of changing attitudes. Like the MHR, The St Mungo Museum reflects the political will of, in this case local government, but also the religious legacy and indeed contemporary influence of the dominant local faith, Protestantism. This is a secular space where religious activities can take place. Within months of opening it celebrated its millionth visitor.

Museum of World Religions Taiwan

"Establishing a World Religions Museum is a practical requirement for this era... from which to choose one's religion'. Entering the museum will be like entering a religious department

store. This establishment is not age or gender-specific, but aims to meet the requirements of every category of person on the basis of individual needs and experiences." (Master Hsin Tao, Museum of World Religions, 2003)

The Museum of World Religions in Taiwan was influenced in part by the St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art, Glasgow in terms of the way it approaches displays however it has a very different religious cultural influence being Buddhist run. The MWR is based in a department store in Taipei and brings together the elements of shopping and seeking faith with museum attending and actively aims to create a supermarket of faith with something for everyone. It opened in 2003 and projects a vision of 'respect, tolerance and love' to promote the religious ideal of 'love and peace' to an international society. The scale of building does inspire awe and as the visitor walks down through the introductory section they are confronted with a series of questions projected onto pillars in Chinese and English. These include: 'What was I before I was born?', 'What is consciousness?', 'Why are we afraid of dying?' These are not questions easily answered and indeed not really here. Rather they reflect the questioning nature of the human spirit and imply that accepting and embracing religion can help the individual to grapple with what cannot be explained or readily understood in this life.

It is a sensual space with floors and walls and textures used to create relationships with the elements and with the physical self. Water in purification section runs down the wall and leaves a permanent puddle on the floor, you can leave your handprint on the wall, and there are sounds and images although little in the way of smell. Signs of the zodiac, hero myths are given the same credence as doctrine as culture and religion merge and ebb and flow. Although the museum also highlights the main world faiths in a series of alter like displays there is more emphasis on Eastern faiths such as Shinto. Ancient

Egypt becomes a belief system as much as a historical account of the way people lived. Oral testimony is used to highlight religious awakenings and video clips show famous faces talking about their faith and encouraging others to make a leap of faith *'In the scientific world and the world of technology you have to see before you believe. In our world you have to believe before you see.'* (Participant, MWR, 2003).

Love is an abiding theme and in a way that is also promoting self love (though not self-interest), learning to accept and meditate. The message is clear: it does not really matter which faith you chose as long as you chose one and without faith (or indeed self love) an individual cannot achieve their full potential as is clear in the following quote. *'Every human being, I think, has a spark of the divine ...what it means is there is a deep conscious within us. We can ignore it, suppress it, repress it but it shall always be there. It takes something drastic to bring about the change.'* (Participant, Museum of World Religions, 2003)

This is at once a museum which reflects the culture that shaped it and a very contemporary and progressive museum which reflects on what it is to be human with or without faith. The museum maintains that with faith is better. In many ways the museum takes a very positivist stance and atrocity, war, and other dark deeds often committed in the name of faith(s) is largely absent although videos do occasionally show dark images of violence and discord these are not interpreted in the main. The museum does however promote the idea of the 'global village' promoting 'mind reformation' and 'life education' which 'enables religions to be developed in a free and open environment, and outreached to different classes' (Master Hsin Tao, Museum of World Religions, 2003). This then is a *religious* museum of religion and more so than any of the others. Buddhist services are held in the café space and Buddhist nuns fulfil many of the administrative and organisational tasks.

Methodology for field work at the Museum of World Religion

Field work at the museum in January 2006 involved observation, interviews with staff and visitors were invited to fill in a questionnaire. The questionnaire had a mixture of open and closed questions to determine where visitors came from, their faith if any, why they attended the museum that day and also importantly sought to ascertain visitors emotional engagement with displays. Ultimately this meant trying to determine whether they were shopping for faith or simply acting as museum visitors. As the research trip was held in January and just before the Chinese New Year there were arguably fewer people visiting the museum from the locality. In fact the small sample size of 30 persons reflected almost all of the adult visitors to the museum during that period and so the findings must be taken in that light.

Findings and visitor engagement with displays

The Museum of World Religions currently attracts 20,000 visitors a year with 70% of those being school children. Museum staff are aiming for 50,000 visitors per annum and there is a significant web presence (+278000 hits) with chat groups, poems, shop, and even the chance to give a donation. Of those surveyed 91% set out to visit museum, 85% had never been before and 66% said they were Buddhists. Some 18% were tourists and only 1/3 were religious although 27% considered themselves spiritual. Only 27% were interested in learning about religions and 6% professed themselves to be atheist although one of those also said he was of the Shinto faith. Some 54% were male.

In response to a question about their feelings when in the museum 42% said that they felt peaceful, 27% spiritual inside although 24% admitted that they only felt as if they were in a museum. Only 9% felt they were in a department store of religions where they could chose their

faith whilst 6% likened the museum to a temple or place of worship. No one felt angry or bored. All of which confirms that the majority of visitors were locals, on their first visit to the museums and who set out intending to go there. 67% felt either spiritual or peaceful inside which suggests that the museum succeeds in creating a calm venue in which to explore faiths (or that they felt in a museum going mood that day). 33% visited because they are interested in museums with only 21% seeking to discover what faith could do for them. Interestingly only 3% admitted an interest in shopping around for faith with only 3% (surprising given the number of Buddhists in the sample) implying that the museum offered them something more because they were Buddhist. Two young American tourists added that The Museum of World Religions 'seemed a cool place to visit...having read about it in Lonely Planet'.

All of the above seems to suggest that the museum functions as a museum rather than a place of worship with visitors expectations being met. People are emotionally engaging with the building and displays in a limited and not life changing way. Whilst all of those surveyed enjoyed the visit no-one expressed a scholarly interest in religion or viewed the museum as a Buddhist reading of world faiths. It seems then that there is a distinction to be made between the desired impact the museum has on people and the way they perceive it. Although the St Mungo Museum does not try to influence visitor responses to the displays or to convert them it does offer visions and versions of religions as understood and believed by followers of those faiths which clearly has a different purpose than the MHR, St Petersburg. People are free to emotionally or spiritually engage with any faith within the museum.

Interestingly at the Museum of the History of Religion is adamant that is it not partisan or preaching. Museum director Koutchinsky argues that "The Museum is not taking an apologist stand towards any ideological system. That is why our public comprise people who are inter-

ested in history, people of different beliefs and atheists." (Koutchinsky, 2006:156) However it is possible that visitors also bring their own sense of religion or spiritual need to the museum. It must also be borne in mind that it is actual visitors that are being referred to throughout and not non-users and it is debatable as to whether non users would rather visit a religious building than a museum!

Conclusion

It seems that in an increasingly fragmented and global society individuals can develop religious as well as cultural aspirations. These may grow from their exposure to the faiths of the 'other' but are not necessarily reflecting faith of their own culture or family. For some people in the West this may mean looking towards Eastern faiths, influenced by meditation and yoga, for those in the East it can mean choosing to return to faith with renewed vigour. People can make decisions on how, what and where to worship and many chose not to but may continue to believe in or at least not totally disregard the notion that there is a god or a spiritual path worth treading as Brown (2001) suggests. Robbins argues that whilst globalisation does have a fragmenting affect on cultures and individuals sense of self and place, and the growth in fundamentalism can be attributed to the fear of, it does not necessarily lead to homogenised culture. What "globalisation actually brings into existence is a new basis for thinking about the relation between cultural convergence and cultural difference" (Robbins, 2003:42). Religious museums offer exactly that: a space to experience the convergence of cultures in a generally positive way. As Raymond a volunteer guide at the Museum of World Religions stated, "I was in the USA when Sep 11 happened and I know what that feels like. This place helps towards an understanding of world peace..." (Raymond, 2006).

Museums of religion function as 'cultural stations' (Burns, 2000:95) rather than religious

ones and that there may be similar benefits to visitors in experiencing culturally significant sites in terms of what Durkheim categorises as the importance of religion in developing social cohesion. For many tourist visitors this appreciation of other cultures as interpreted in museums is part of the process of having learned not just how to gaze but *where*. Urry shows how this gaze is developed through examining MacCannell's argument that "there is normally a process of sacralization that renders a particular natural and cultural object as a sacred object of the tourist ritual" (Urry, 10:2002) One potential conclusion may be that for those without faith there will be a lack of religiosity brought to the gaze when consuming religious objects in the museum. For those with faith the secular nature of the museum changes the way that these objects are viewed.

For the religious or irreligious alike the act of visiting museums is a way of engaging with the notion of what it is to be human when faced with the cultural objects which reflect human activity. What is clear is that all museum visits regardless of exhibit themes reflect the global nature of the consumer society and museums are actively courting consumers of culture. For many that means taking the opportunity to develop a personal faith or sense of spirituality based on consumer choice or they can choose only to 'window shop' taking interest in and pleasure from the selection of religious options on display within the department store of faith that is the museum of religion. Indeed as Miller argues individuality can be shaped through shopping (Miller, 1998). It seems likely though than only the already converted will seek to buy.

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Quotes from museum displays

Participant quotes are drawn from displays at the Museum of World Religion, Taiwan

Interviews

Raymond in personal communication with author 29/1/2006

