



# Museality as a Matrix of the Production, Reception, and Circulation of Knowledge Concerning Religion

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## Abstract

Aesthetics of religion focuses on the sensual and representational aspects of religion and develops appropriate terminological tools. The idea of museality as an analytical and heuristic term for culture analysis is specified in the present paper by linking it to the history and dynamics of knowledge. Museums as institutions and cultural practice play a crucial role in the orders and politics of knowledge about religion in Europe. By means of different examples, museality is described as a specific and historically generated cultural pattern of perceiving, imagining, and knowing about religion in modernity. The examples focus on the production of different qualities of knowledge in exhibitions relating to religion, on transitions between religion and science in museums, and on popularisation as a mode of the circulation of knowledge about religion.

These reflections on museality and knowledge dynamics could provide new potentials for inter-connective academic research, as well as for trans-disciplinary cooperation between the study of religion and museums.

## Keywords

knowledge, museum, aesthetics of religion, popularisation, modernity

## 1. Introduction

What kind of knowledge about religion is needed in a pluralistic society? What is the role of museums in the dynamics of knowledge? Who are the experts for knowledge of religion in a society? Questions like these make clear that museums as institutions and social practice in European history are deeply connected to the processes of production, reception, and circulation of knowledge and its understanding in society. While in the nineteenth century museums mainly produced seemingly factual information about ‘the other,’ in recent years they have increasingly become central sites for negotiation of the historical, political and cultural conditions of knowledge in a post-colonial world. What we know of religion and understand as religion in Europe is influenced by the practice of collecting and presenting in museums. In turn, the practice of exhibiting religion in museums is a consequence of the European understanding of knowledge as heritage and the changing role of religion in modernity: it is no longer only religious institutions that produce knowledge of religion, but religious knowledge also emerges through transfer processes between art, literature, medicine, science, and religion. Therefore the writing of a ‘religious history of the museum’ needs to be complemented by a ‘museal history of religion,’ concerned with the influence of museums as practice and institution, as ‘generator’ and ‘broker’ of public knowledge about religion(s), but also of religious knowledge.

As has been shown, museums were always instrumental in developing world views and asserting accepted knowledge about reality.<sup>1</sup> Stereotypes of nationalistic, orientalist, and colonial perceptions of the world were connected to the presentation of facts, photos, and objects. The interconnections of aesthetics, perception, and values mould the imaginations and associations individuals share within a culture. The question,

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<sup>1</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995); Henrietta Lidchi, “The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting other Cultures,” in: Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997), 151–208; Ludmilla Jordanova, “Museums: Representing the Real?,” in: George Levine (ed.), *Realism and Representation: Essays on the Problem of Realism in Relation to Science, Literature, and Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 255–274; Martin Kemp, “Taking it on Trust: Form and Meaning in Naturalistic Representation,” *Archives of Natural History* 17 (1990), 127–188; Sharon Macdonald, *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998).

then, is not only how knowledge of religion in European culture is produced, but also what does it look like, how does it feel, sound, smell, and by what dynamics does it become accepted as knowledge?

In this context it will be useful to conceptualise the term *museality* in order to put into focus the complex interrelations between knowledge, politics, and perceptions of religion in modernity and the specific quality of knowledge dynamics produced by the cultural institution ‘museum’ in this field. Such a term should be considered as a heuristic and analytical tool for raising questions and expanding the areas of research in the study of religion. Combined with the concept of *knowledge*, which is another candidate for a critical term in the aesthetics of religion, the term *museality* describes a cultural pattern which emerges from social practice and perception, and from historically developed and seemingly self-evident ways of how European cultures select, interpret, and perceive reality. We start from the idea that *museality* describes a dialectical process between what people find in their culture (museums), what they do (e.g., visiting museums as children), what they feel, imagine and perceive (attributing certain qualities to objects and aesthetic designs, including smells, sounds, etc.), what they expect (museums are seen as places of learning, not of illusion or fiction), and how they connect all that to what they perceive as their knowledge of the world.

## 2. Why Knowledge? A Key to Museality as an Analytical Concept

Knowledge complements *museality* as a critical term not only because *museality* is an important part of the history of knowledge, but also because knowledge has become an important analytical concept within the humanities. While the European discourse about knowledge was traditionally dominated by philosophical and theological debates, in the past few decades the positions of pragmatist and constructivist critical theories have been developed further by the idea of knowledge processing and management, and by cultural and literary studies. Crucially important is the recent sociology of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> These approaches are based on the

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<sup>2</sup>) For an overview of the different concepts within the sociology of knowledge, see Rainer Schützeichel (ed.), *Handbuch Wissenssoziologie und Wissensforschung* (Konstanz: UvK, 2007).

constructivist idea that knowledge emerges as part of an ongoing process depending on the cultural context, historical situation, and political conditions. Knowledge is what societies see and believe to be plausible as knowledge for ‘good reasons,’ and what is believed to ‘be the case.’ In addition to the traditional sociology of knowledge, two other concepts have been highly influential: Foucault’s ideas of the discursive quality of knowledge and his “Archaeology of Knowledge,” and the theory of social systems by Niklas Luhmann. According to Michel Foucault, knowledge is deeply embedded in power relations, which he examines in terms of a history of imaginations and social practice.<sup>3</sup> While Luhmann brought into focus the specific ways of processing knowledge within and between the social subsystems, the work of Berger & Luckmann integrated religion into the perspective of the sociology of knowledge and concentrated on the interface between individuals and society in the processes of production, reception and circulation of knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

As the “aesthetic turn” has made clear, knowledge is by no means just a question of cognition, rationality and mind, conceptualised as entities which are separated from emotions, the body, and physical processes. Consequently, overcoming Cartesian dualism was a crucial endeavour for knowledge studies<sup>5</sup> which brought the historicity of both knowledge and the notion of rationality into sharp focus.<sup>6</sup> In the early sociology of knowledge (Scheler, Mannheim, Husserl, Schütz) as well as in the emerging cultural and aesthetic studies, normative understandings of knowledge turned into questions focused on the different kinds of knowledge by which individuals manage their everyday life. The connections between the institutionalised production of knowledge, i.e. in schools or churches,

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<sup>3</sup>) Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>4</sup>) Peter L. Berger & Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Anchor, 1966).

<sup>5</sup>) On this tradition of affirming or rejecting dualistic-rationalistic positions within academic literature and on connecting the concept of body with knowledge, see Anne Koch, “Reasons for the Boom of Body Discourses in the Humanities and the Social Sciences since the 1980s. A Chapter in European History of Religion,” in: Angelika Berlejung, Johannes Quack & Jan Dietrich (eds), *Menschenbilder und Körperkonzepte* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2011). Important turning points were: Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1966); for the distinction of ‘knowing that’ and ‘knowing how,’ see Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949).

<sup>6</sup>) Lorraine Daston & Peter Gallison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

and the implicit or habitual transmission of knowledge, as well as the link between collective knowledge and its individual or critical acceptance were explored.

Why, after all, call all this knowledge? If we understand knowledge as a basic human ability to select, memorise, and pass on data and information, to make sense of the perceived reality, and to be able to manage everyday life as much as highly specialized and intellectually demanding actions, then the dimensions of implicit and explicit, conscious and non-conscious, reflective and non-reflective processes need to be taken into account. To understand how religions influence and are influenced by processes of cognition and knowledge, is crucially important.

### **3. Why Knowledge and Museality as Interfaces of Aesthetics and Religion?**

In the European philosophical tradition, reflections on aesthetics led to normative ideas of beauty, harmony and perfection and to different analytical approaches. Seeing and touching, as well as dancing or singing, have been objects of idealisation as well as criticism, especially in the Christian tradition. Strategies of excluding bodily, sensual, or emotional qualities from the traditions of knowledge correspond to their particular importance in the cultural imagination of Europe. A paradoxical situation emerged: in contrast to the pagan gods, the monotheistic God was conceptualised as invisible, but religion needed sensual representations to be persuasive. While on the one hand the sensual was being devalued, on the other it was needed as material reference to the non-sensual centre of belief. Museums in the nineteenth century found themselves faced with the same paradox: religion was represented by sensual objects and artefacts, which were supposed to represent a notion of religion beyond things and practices. On the one hand, the museum as an educational institution was an alternative to the self-representation of religions; on the other hand, exhibiting religion involved religious judgements, and objects were understood as symbols for wrong and superstitious religious practices or for a hypostasised, universal religious entity, may it be the 'Holy' or any kind of spiritual power.

Museums partly continued the text-centred hierarchy of religions by understanding objects as media of right or wrong religious practice, and just like the early phenomenology of religion they disseminated a

universalistic, truth-claiming notion of religion.<sup>7</sup> Behind the objects, materials, pictures and statues, the “Holy Book” and the scriptural understanding of religious knowledge as dogma and theology as the central criteria of perceiving religious phenomena can virtually be seen. Applying the ‘representational turn’ in knowledge theory, objects are understood as part of a process of interpretation and no longer as a symbolic indication of a hidden reality.<sup>8</sup> Therefore religious knowledge is to be seen as a conglomerate of different levels, channels, and forms of knowledge, of how to practise, to feel, to imagine within a cultural tradition.

Furthermore, the descriptive idea of religious knowledge needs to be distinguished from religious self-definitions and the religious utterances which claim to be knowledge, such as knowledge by revelation or transmitted by visions or prophecies, or claims which integrate academic knowledge into a ‘holistic’ interpretation of history and the world.<sup>9</sup> For the aesthetics of religion the very idea of an aesthetics of knowledge is important in order to show how knowledge is created and understood, and how different claims and different qualities of knowledge emerge. The differentiation between scientific and religious knowledge, for example, can be described as a much more dynamic and fluid process than is often expected. Museums as locations and practice and museality as a cultural pattern are in this respect central elements of an interconnected history of knowledge and religion.

#### **4. Museums as Institutions, Museality as Matrix: Aspects and Dimensions**

This article will now explore exemplary fields and objects brought into focus by this analytical perspective. If knowledge can be described as a bodily and perceptual process, the different sensual modes of perception and the different products (pictures, sounds, odours, choreographies) need

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<sup>7</sup> See Susanne Claußen, *Anschauungssache Religion: Zur musealen Repräsentation religiöser Artefakte* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See Karl-Ludwig Pfeiffer & Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht (eds.), *Materialities of Communication* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> Studies on specifically religious strategies of knowledge include Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2004); Kocku von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010).

to be acknowledged in a way which takes their special conditions into account. Focusing on the dynamics of knowledge about religion *in museums* means asking about what happens between the locus, the object, the media and the human beings. The special focus of aesthetics of religion is on (a) the plurality of sensual media in which religion represents itself, (b) the aesthetic devices and media used in the expositions, and (c) the qualities of knowledge addressed and produced, which in their consequences also reach beyond the situation of the exhibition.

For these purposes, one important notion relating to religious knowledge in modernity needs to be mentioned specifically: *experience* has become a relatively new part of religious knowledge legitimation.<sup>10</sup> A descriptive perspective cannot accept ‘religious experience’ as a persuasive argument or proof for religious truth. The outcome of the religious experience is normatively prepared and therefore prescribed by the teachings in the religious tradition the individual belongs to. This points to the important question as to what kind of knowledge about religion museums can offer. Whether it is possible—and desirable—to impart knowledge about religion as experience, and what kind of experience this could be is therefore a practical question with a broad theoretical background.

Since Max Scheler and Karl Mannheim tried in the 1920s to distinguish ideological and religious knowledge from other forms of knowledge, debates have gone on as to how these lines of definition can be drawn. In sum, it is accepted that different forms of knowledge correlate with particular attitudes and vested interests that need to be examined. The differences between these forms are not absolute. Instead, there are transitions between them to be observed in the politics of exhibiting religion, and the perspective of the aesthetics of knowledge might well contribute to the debate on ideology. Another question is whether museums present knowledge of religion as a reproduction of religious self-understanding or as reflective knowledge, integrating the process of knowing itself. But even when exhibitions aesthetically try to overcome the gesture of “that’s how it is,” as Mieke Bal puts it,<sup>11</sup> the dilemma persists: just like Marshall McLuhan’s

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Sharf, “Experience,” in: Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 94–116; Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>11</sup> For an analysis of the semiotic and rhetorical processes underlying the practice of exposing, see Mieke Bal, *Double Exposure: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (London: Routledge, 1996).

“the medium is the message,” museums still remain ‘engines of realism’ by the institutional power they have and the selections they make. The persuasive power of facts and objects is highly effective, the dignity of impressive architecture and the nimbus of museality are strong rhetorical figures in themselves. Bal’s idea of a “double exposure” is stimulating in this respect. Museums always and unwillingly expose not just their objects and explanations, but they also expose themselves and their strategies of knowledge production. Thinking about the aesthetic possibilities of making this explicit and inviting visitors to be contributors to this process are aims of many current museological concepts.<sup>12</sup> These aspects are addressed in the following sections about qualities of knowledge in exhibitions on religion, about transitions between religion and science in museums, and the popularisation of knowledge about religion.

## **5. Knowledge and Perception in Religious and Museal Spaces: Exhibiting ‘Holy Stones’ in the Marburg University Museum of Religions**

Generally, in Europe, knowledge, and also religious knowledge, is not only conveyed by media privileged by Western science such as texts and teachings, but is formed—as Anne Koch and Hubert Mohr have shown<sup>13</sup>—on all levels of human sensory perception. Whether religious images, architecture, music, or other expressions of a religion are found in their ‘natural habitat’ or in a museum, they always trigger physical sense perceptions.

‘Musealising’ religious objects, then, produces at least two different forms of knowledge. While an altar setting in a cult is an installation seen as authentic and presenting aspects of the religion itself, an altar setting in a museum can be seen as fake and merely a representation (or an altar in a church setting is perceived as art in a museum, see Cordoba example below). Nevertheless, both forms of knowledge are the result of social construction and can play a role in an exhibition. Coins, flowers and other

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<sup>12)</sup> See Susan Kamel, *Wege zur Vermittlung von Religionen in Berliner Museen: Black Kaaba meets White Cube* (Berlin: VS Verlag, 2004).

<sup>13)</sup> Koch, *Reasons*; for the concept of a ‘panorama of perception’ in and through different religious traditions, see Hubert Mohr, “Perception/Sensory System,” in: Kocku von Stuckrad (ed.): *Brill Dictionary of Religion, vol. III* (Leiden & Boston: Brill), 1435–1448.



offerings laid down by visitors in front of sacred statues in museums are examples of this double nature of the display. Knowledge *about* religion is often intensely intertwined with *religious* knowledge and claims on what religion should be like. As a consequence, exhibiting religious objects needs to take into account a specific and especially strong “imaginative activity”<sup>14</sup> related to them, connected to persuasions, attitudes, emotions and a certain sensitivity, which is often addressed as a special category of ‘religious feelings.’ How this double nature of the objects can be addressed in exhibitions will be illustrated by a short case study.

The Religionskundliche Sammlung (Museum of Religions) at Marburg University has for a number of years displayed a show-case dedicated to informing the visitor about the Hindu god Vishnu. On the bottom shelf of this case, four fossil stones are grouped together next to a number of statues, without written labels explaining what connects these ‘natural’ objects to Vishnu worship. Most visitors do not pay much attention to the four fossils, unless they know that certain fossil stones are revered as the god Vishnu himself. One Vaishnava (Vishnu worshipping) visitor expressed his great excitement and joy about finding the rare *Śālagrāma-śilā* (“Stones from [the village] Śālagrāma”)—for that is what they are called in the religious context—in Marburg, and asked for permission to give them cultic attention (washing and bowing to them). Since this Vaishnava visitor—a practising member of the ISKCON—was also a student at Marburg University, he was asked by the museum’s curator (Katja Triplett) to work out a new exhibition concept for the *śilā* that would convey different kinds of knowledge, especially his expert knowledge of the ritual and the cultural contexts of these particular fossils.

The first step in writing labels for objects on display is to examine the museum’s catalogue and determine the provenance. In the case of the fossil stones, information was scarce: the catalogue states that the objects were “holy stones” (*Heilige Steine*) from India, given to the collection by Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), the founder of the Religionskundliche Sammlung, after 1927. One other ‘natural’ object is a dried *Tulasī* plant carefully wrapped in a paper envelope. The meaning and context of these objects remain unclear from the museum’s catalogue. Yet, one may surmise that

<sup>14</sup> Peter Bräunlein, “Zurück zu den Sachen! Religionswissenschaft vor dem Objekt,” in: Peter J. Bräunlein (ed.), *Religion & Museum: Zur visuellen Repräsentation von Religionen im öffentlichen Raum* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2004), 7–53, at p. 27.

the four fossils and the Tulasī plant were possibly purchased by or presented to Otto as a set since the well-known myth connected with the *Śālagrāma-śilā* involves a husband and wife who are turned into stone (*śilā*) and a plant called *tulasī* and they are always worshipped together.<sup>15</sup>



**Fig. 1.** Photo of the Marburg “holy stones” for a companion publication of the exhibition “Religious Energy. On Man and God” at the Deutsche Hygiene Museum in Dresden (2010–2011). The fossils—or the *Śālagrāma-śilā*—are depicted as a set but in isolation on a neutral grey studio background. Their wheel-like markings that render them manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu are turned towards the viewer of the photo. The photo resembles a passport photo in that it imparts only the countenance of the photographed with displaying as minimal context as possible not to distract from the object ‘itself.’ In a natural scientific publication this photo could be seen as imparting knowledge on fossils of particular animals, not bodies of a deity. © Religionskundliche Sammlung (Museum of Religions) Marburg

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., Alexandra van der Geer, Michael Dermitzakis & John de Vos, “Fossil folklore from India: the Siwalik Hills and the Mahābhārata,” *Folklore* 119/1 (2008), 71–92.

An exhibition concept for the four fossils poses a particular challenge. The objects are found in nature and are not manipulated by humans. Therefore, the meaning bestowed on them cannot easily be read from a special design or by comparison with similar objects. They have no history of styles and design that usually helps to determine the context, function and use of objects. In this way, the fossils resemble religious objects such as mountains or islands. However, a landscape that represents the body of a deity, or is part of a cosmology, is not portable and cannot be placed on altars or in museum cases. The stones can be easily handled in cultic actions and can be dispersed to other areas, thereby becoming the ‘cultic currency’ in a particular tradition.

In Europe, knowledge about ‘natural’ objects falls into the area of the natural sciences. Therefore, a visitor who identified himself as a geologist said to the museum’s curator that the stones are not gods in any way, but *Aulacosphinctus* or *Aulacosphinctoides*, and he knew the geological period when these creatures lived, when they became fossilised and why they were found in the Gandakī river region in India. Nevertheless, the naming of natural phenomena is not solely based on European ideas and often does take into account non-European cultural contexts. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, these particular fossils were called *Ammonites sacer* because of their well-known function as sacred objects. The plant worshipped as the goddess Tulasī, the wife of Vishnu, is a basil with the Western botanical name of *Ocimum tenuiflorum*. It is also known as *Ocimum sanctum*. Again, this name draws on knowledge about its religious use in the region of origin. These different aspects of knowledge, originally gained in the European scientific context, but with reference to non-European religions, can all be used in the new exhibition concept of the four ‘neglected’ fossils.

Religious knowledge about the fossils is quite well documented in Sanskrit sources, and since the practice of fossil worship is a living tradition, practitioners speak or write about the rituals and the meaning of the stones. This information can be used in the museum as well, for imparting knowledge that forms part of a non-European knowledge system. The new exhibition will also convey the sensual impact of the *Śālagrāma-śilā*, for instance by showing photos of an altar set-up with the *śilā* and the basil plant, perhaps with pictures of ritual actions surrounding the altar and its objects. The fossils can be displayed on a model altar giving visitors the chance to visualise the central objects in context. The question is whether to provide space for actual *puja* (worship) of the *śilā*. The space could also

be used by visitors to ‘get a feel’ for the religious objects. This would mean that the exhibition intends to convey religious knowledge (experience of the ‘holy’) to visitors who are not Vishnu believers, a concept that the Religionskundliche Sammlung does not pursue at present. The idea of a ‘contact zone’ may be problematic because objects are contextualised skillfully with the intention of conveying information in terms of the study of religions.

The fossils are a good example of the religious usage of aesthetics. The sensual perception of ‘natural’ objects used for religious rituals differs significantly from the perception of artefacts in that in their natural environment—the river bed—they do not have any apparent connection with religion when perceived by a non-believer. One possibility is to say that they really are a manifestation of the god Vishnu and make themselves known to the human that encounters them in the river bed (‘salvational knowledge’ or *Offenbarungswissen*). But apart from this possible assumption, it is human action which gives those fossils the meaning they have in Hindu (and Buddhist) tradition. Someone wanting to impart knowledge about the earth’s history could create a show case with images of the Gandakī river and place the four fossils beside them; or they could collect other natural rocks and pebbles from the river and recreate the material making up the river bed. As bodies of Vishnu, the fossils are placed beside other (re)presentations of the god that are man-made, such as is the case with the present exhibition at the Religionskundliche Sammlung, to convey thoughts, ideas, and meanings of a particular religious tradition. In the new exhibition, these two possibilities could overlap.

Another possibility is to arrange the fossils in such a way as to convey a minimalistic aesthetic impression of the fossilised ancient creatures, those four smooth black rocks with peculiar, wheel-like markings. This treatment would resemble the installation of a modern artist. Natural objects may be placed in a man-made environment to guide the perceiver’s mind to new, different or extraordinary perceptions in a process of *Verfremdung* (distancing). The knowledge imparted in an ‘artistic’ installation would not be neutral. Still, the ‘beauty’ and ‘extraordinariness’ of the fossil stones may have been what first attracted humans to them and enticed them to see the stones as divine manifestations. So, all three ways of displaying the Indian fossils—geological, religious, and aesthetic—could be used to stage a thought- and sense-provoking exhibition. Overall, three systems of knowledge could be utilised in the exhibition: The first is knowledge produced and circulated by Sanskrit texts, Hindu scholars and ritual experts,

and ‘regular’ worshippers. The second system of knowledge is that of Western academia: the natural sciences, the study of religions, the history of research, and the biography of the collector or researcher. Finally, museum studies, design, presentational and artistic technology form a third system of knowledge that becomes intertwined with the other two. And a fourth component will be added by the visitors, their expectations and their prior knowledge.

## 6. Differentiating between Religious and Scientific Knowledge in the Creation Museum and the American Museum of Natural History

As the example from Marburg shows, when staging exhibitions of religion one needs to decide how religion should be presented, what kinds of knowledge about religion should be imparted, and how religious knowledge and academic knowledge should interact. But museums themselves also play a role in producing the very categories of religion and science, sometimes blurring the lines of demarcation to the point when scientific presentations function *as* religion.<sup>16</sup> The objects in an exhibition carry scientific, as well as religious or artistic, interpretive patterns and become representations of certain concepts of knowledge. As such they participate in the production of knowledge as either scientific or religious and are embedded in a complex field of negotiations which could be analysed as a process of differentiation between different social systems (Luhmann) or powerful discourses (Foucault).

Analysing museums as locations of the differentiation of knowledge, one could ask which underlying concepts of knowledge, truth and reality form the basis of the museum’s presentation of its objects. How does the exhibition and the arrangement of the objects in the museum reflect concepts of scientific and religious knowledge in the surrounding society, and what kind of relationship between the two forms of knowledge is the museum actively interested in promoting and producing? The “Creation Museum” built by the “Answers in Genesis” apologetic ministry at a cost

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<sup>16</sup> Angela Matyssek, “Die Wissenschaft als Religion, das Präparat als Reliquie: Rudolf Virchow und das Pathologische Museum der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin,” in: Anke te Heesen & E.C. Spary (eds.): *Sammeln als Wissen: Das Sammeln und seine wissenschaftsgeschichtliche Bedeutung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2001), 142–168.

of 27 million US dollars in 2007, is located in northern Kentucky.<sup>17</sup> It claims to be a museum in which one can “experience history in a completely unprecedented way”<sup>18</sup>. The main exhibition is divided into a number of halls which focus on specific biblical topics such as “Noah’s Ark,” “The Garden of Eden,” “Genesis,” and “Babel Confusion”; they display the fallen state of the world in the “Culture in Crisis” room, or are dedicated to controversies regarding the theory of evolution and the natural sciences. The whole layout is loosely built around what the museum calls the “7 C’s in God’s Eternal Plan”: creation, corruption, catastrophe, confusion, Christ, cross, and consummation.

The Creation Museum operates in a society in which—even if challenged by the creationists—science as a social endeavour is a highly respected authority which produces ‘objective’ statements on the natural world and man’s place in it. It builds on this image of science and the authority of natural history museums in the public sphere. In its exhibitions, the Creation Museum imitates the values of standard scientific practice and relies heavily on rationalistic argumentation. It claims to be a scientific museum and in trying to discredit the theory of evolution presents itself as following scientific methods.<sup>19</sup>

A specific interpretation of what constitutes science and the scientific method is presented through the concept of ‘biblically correct science,’ and the notion that ‘facts’ are the basis for scientific descriptions, while needing to be interpreted from certain ‘perspectives’ (all of which are initially equally valid). In the first room of the main exhibition, there is a display of two scientists looking at the same dinosaur fossil at an excavation site. In the next room (called “Starting Points”) the museum proposes that the process of producing scientific knowledge consists of two steps, starting with the raw data from the natural world (the ‘facts’) which is then

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<sup>17</sup> See the webpage of the “Creation Museum” at <http://creationmuseum.org/> (accessed on 2 June 2010). For the context of the creationism debate, see Eugenie Scott, *Evolution vs. Creationism: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Edward Larson, *Trial and Error: The American Controversy over Creation and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> “About the Museum,” <http://creationmuseum.org/about/> (accessed on 2 June 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Julie Homchick, “Displaying Controversy: Evolution, Creation, and Museums” (unpublished dissertation, University of Washington, 2009), 87 (available at: <http://gradworks.umi.com/33/77/3377287.html>).

interpreted by the scientist. Every interpretation is based on a certain ‘starting point,’ which strongly influences it. In this specific example, scientific inference from the fossil record and the background of geological and evolutionary theories is presented as one starting point for the production of scientific knowledge, while using the biblical scriptures is presented as a second, equally valid starting point. Each of the palaeontologists sees and interprets the raw data through the lens provided by his starting point, and each produces scientific knowledge about the origin and context of the fossil they are looking at.<sup>20</sup> Of course, it is the museum’s goal that visitors to the museum will in the end be led to conclude that the creationist’s starting point is the more correct one. Fittingly, Answers in Genesis states on its website: “When properly understood, the ‘evidence’ confirms the biblical account.”<sup>21</sup>

However, the Creation Museum does not want to be only a site where certain kinds of knowledge are presented, but also a place where they can actually be *experienced*. Through the presentation of dinosaurs in the “Dinosaur Den,” the visitors, especially children, can imagine a time and space in which humans were actually living and playing with these awesome creatures.<sup>22</sup> The museum aims to give believers the opportunity to actually experience the truth of the biblical interpretation of history which can turn the museum visit into a religious experience. For some visitors, this material presentation of their religious belief and the immersion in a spatial recreation of the biblical stories can be a powerful experience. In his study of the anti-museum rally on the museum’s opening day, David E. Long reports that he saw an elder Mennonite woman crying in front of one of the displays. Because of his experience with Mennoites’ often solemn and stoic attitudes he considers such a public display of emotion as powerful evidence of the experiential quality of the museum.<sup>23</sup> This fits in well with the self-description of the exhibition in advertisements and on its web page, where the tagline: “Prepare to Believe” is repeatedly used.<sup>24</sup> So even if the museum presents itself as a scientific venue, representing an alternative

<sup>20</sup> See Homchick, “Displaying,” 74–78.

<sup>21</sup> “Our Message,” <http://www.answersingenesis.org/about> (accessed on 2 June 2010).

<sup>22</sup> See Homchick, “Displaying,” 86.

<sup>23</sup> David E. Long, “Scientists at Play in a Field of the Lord,” *Cultural Studies of Science Education* 5/1, 213–235, at p. 232.

<sup>24</sup> “Creation Museum—Creation, Evolution, Science, Dinosaurs, Family, Christian Worldview,” <http://creationmuseum.org/> (accessed on 2 June 2010).

scientific theory about human origins, the scientific knowledge presented in the exhibition is clearly meant to provoke a *religious* response as well. In the face of the material evidence presented by the museum, the visitor is expected to finally believe in the truth of the bible, especially as it concerns the scientific reconstruction of the history of the planet Earth.

In this way, the Creation Museum serves as a space in which knowledge normally considered to be religious, and as such not tangible, is provided with a material representation through the aesthetics associated with a scientific exhibition. This blurring of the distinction between what constitutes a scientific and what constitutes a religious exhibition can be contrasted with the example of an important natural history museum and its treatment of the relationship between science and religion.

The 9,000 square foot Anne and Bernard Spitzer Hall of Human Origins at the American Museum of Natural History in New York was completely redone in 2007 and displays the history of human evolution through a combination of evidence from the fossil record and a presentation of recent advances in genomic science.<sup>25</sup> It aims to be “an emphatic statement about the theory of evolution and its power to tell us our origins and history”<sup>26</sup> and is a central part of the museum’s attempt to further public understanding of science. Divided into four rooms, the hall is designed with a linear structure that tells the visitor about classical fossil evidence and new DNA evidence of human evolution.

In the fourth and last room, the exhibition includes a section on science and religion, evidence that the museum’s curators deemed it necessary to actively present their concepts of science and religion and the relationship between the two.<sup>27</sup> The section is called “Understanding Our Origins” and consists of a small video and some textual displays. The video contains a series of testimonies from established scientists who see science as a discipline distinct from philosophy or religion. According to Kenneth Miller, an evolutionary biologist at Brown University, science cannot tell us about good and evil, because “that’s what philosophy is for, and that’s what moral and ethical systems are for.”<sup>28</sup> The director of the human genome project,

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<sup>25</sup> See Homchick, “Displaying,” 116–120.

<sup>26</sup> Statement by Michael J. Novacek, paleontologist and the museum’s vice-president, quoted in Homchick, “Displaying,” 116.

<sup>27</sup> See Homchick, “Displaying,” 134–136.

<sup>28</sup> Statement from a short video in the “Understanding Our Origins” section, quoted in Homchick, “Displaying,” 134.



Francis Collins, states that he finds “the scientific worldview and spiritual worldview to be entirely compatible.”<sup>29</sup> In the accompanying text, the concepts of ‘science’ and ‘religion’ that lie behind these views are expressed:

[M]any today, including prominent religious leaders and scientists, view the search for understanding as one that embraces both scientific explorations into the material world and a spiritual search for the meaning of human existence, with no inherent conflict between the two. Social controversy over the theory of evolution is long-standing and will doubtless persist. Yet objections based on spiritual or philosophical perspectives do not undermine the theory’s scientific validity, importance and impact.<sup>30</sup>

The video and the text show that this exhibition is trying to promote a specific understanding of what constitutes scientific knowledge and religious knowledge respectively. Science is presented as “explorations into the material world,” and religion as “a spiritual search for the meaning of human existence.” These two domains of human endeavour do not conflict with each other and the knowledge they produce is inherently compatible, since they are two different kinds of knowledge: knowledge about the material world and knowledge about the meaning of human existence. Following this clear differentiation, one would expect the museum’s goals to be limited to the presentation of these scientific explorations. But regarding the museum’s model—science and religion as two different, non-conflicting endeavours—it is interesting to see the questions the museum explicitly addresses, for instance in a statement about the goals of the new design of the evolution exhibition: it is concerned with “the most basic questions we all have about ourselves.”<sup>31</sup> The exhibition’s website reads: “This hall is about all of us—about who we are and where we come from.”<sup>32</sup>

While the curators are certainly referring to a scientific exploration of these questions through the methods of natural science and the theory of

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<sup>29</sup> Statement from a short video in the “Understanding Our Origins” section, quoted in Homchick, “Displaying,” 134.

<sup>30</sup> Textual display in the “Understanding Our Origins” section, quoted in Homchick, “Displaying,” 135.

<sup>31</sup> Taken from a prepared statement by the museum’s president Ellen V. Fuller, quoted in Homchick, “Displaying,” 116.

<sup>32</sup> “Understanding Our Past: The Spitzer Hall of Human Origins,” <http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/humanorigins/past/> (accessed on 2 June 2010).

evolution, the way the questions are framed indicates that the seemingly simple distinction between science and religion as presented in the museum itself may not be so simple after all. While the exhibition presents the search for knowledge about the “meaning of human existence” as a religious concern and sees itself as only presenting scientific knowledge, there is a certain continuity between the questions the exhibition wants to answer and some religious discourses. These basic questions about who we are and where we come from have always been basic questions of specific religious traditions, such as the Gnosis. Is the search for knowledge about ‘where we come from’ a religious, or a scientific question, and what does this mean for the clear borderline between the two endeavours that is proposed by the exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History?

The terms aesthetics of religion and museality help to provide a focus on the way in which religious knowledge is presented through aesthetic forms borrowed from the history of scientific exhibitions, and how scientific exhibitions are forced to make their relationship to religion explicit. The two examples presented here thus reveal museums as public sites in which specific answers to the question of the differentiation of modern fields of knowledge are represented, produced and promoted.

## 7. Religion, Museums, and the Popularisation of Knowledge

Seen from the viewpoint of the history of knowledge, museums are outstandingly important locations for the popularisation of knowledge. Popularisation can be understood as a far broader concept than the transfer of scientific knowledge. Religions also need to convey complex objects of knowledge to their adherents, who often do not have the skills (or the interest) for reading the basic literature themselves or knowing why a ritual has to be carried out exactly this way. Historically there are parallel structures between the popularisation of religion and science. Both use aesthetic and didactic devices, both anticipate structures of professionalism and the distinction between experts and lay persons, and both understand themselves as having a mission.<sup>33</sup> Before the media revolutions and up to and

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<sup>33</sup>) For the differences between religious and scientific forms of knowledge, see the example of the Creation Museum above, the current debate about pseudo-science, and the analysis of designing “perfect knowledge” (see von Stuckrad, *Locations*).

including the nineteenth century, museums can be described as the central medium for the popularisation of science and also as locations for experiments and scientific practice.<sup>34</sup> During the course of the nineteenth century, museums lost this function to laboratories and to specialised groups of researchers in the growing faculties of universities. Consequently, exhibitions no longer represented the *processes* of academic work, but more its *products* and results. So the paradox of museality emerged: on the one hand, museums became powerful institutions, mediating knowledge as facts, habitus and world views. On the other hand they now represented outmoded, antiquated, and obsolete knowledge: the culture and progress of knowledge was something that happened elsewhere. Museality as a critical term has to include these changes of quality.

While popularisation was once understood in terms of the translation of ‘pure’ and secluded scientific knowledge for the benefit of the public, conceptualised either as the uneducated masses or as a bourgeois elite, today the question of popularisation is discussed in different terms: it is situated within the dynamics of knowledge and the circulation of knowledge between the subsystems of society. Even if scientific knowledge is still thought of in terms of status (inclusion, exclusion, affiliation to social groups, access to knowledge or lack of knowledge and refusal of access), the current understanding of popularisation allows us to describe these processes, instead of reproducing the basic hierarchies of knowledge. The metaphors of translation and transfer have changed into those of dialectical influences and interconnections between academic knowledge, its transformation by (mass) media and subculture, and decisions as to which kinds of knowledge will be financed. More descriptive definitions of popularisation<sup>35</sup> understand the term as a certain mode of transforming and generating knowledge, a specific usage of aesthetic devices, and consequences in the distribution, access, and practice of knowledge. Knowledge changes when it is popularised, from process to product, from model to truth, from complex and long-developed premises to a few emblematic metaphors and pictures. Knowledge opens up the way to discursive

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<sup>34</sup> John V. Pickstone, “Museological Science: The place of the analytical/ comparative in nineteenth-century science, technology and medicine,” *History of Science* 32 (1994), 111–138.

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Carsten Kretschmann, “Wissenspopularisierung—ein altes, neues Forschungsfeld,” in: Carsten Kretschmann (ed.), *Wissenspopularisierung: Konzepte der Wissensverbreitung im Wandel* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003), 7–22, at p. 14.

interpretation and it becomes imaginative ‘material,’ for example for artistic, commercial, or religious usage.

Today, the task of popularising knowledge about religion goes far beyond the classical function of collecting and preserving. We are witnessing changes in knowledge distribution (for instance through the Internet and Wikipedia), a change in expectations concerning the presentation of knowledge (experience and events in knowledge design and the competition between educational and commercial knowledge production), but also changes in religion. The diversity and critical aspects of religion challenge the possibilities of exhibitions. In between these different claims, museums find themselves facing a “dilemma of popularisation”: how is it possible to make knowledge interesting and “sensational” without denying its complexity? Between the serenity of the nineteenth century scientific nimbus and the claims of edutainment, religion is a difficult object.<sup>36</sup> Museums need to deal with religious expectations, the demands for ‘orientation knowledge,’ and with the idea that learning should go together with experience and having fun. Different museums, then, decide differently, and some aspects of these decisions and strategies followed for popularising knowledge without sacrificing reflective qualities will be addressed in the following examples.

## **8. Poly-Aesthetics and the Framing of Religious Knowledge in the Jewish Museum in Berlin**

“What does the object do? It keeps silent.”<sup>37</sup> Bräunlein’s laconic appraisal makes clear that objects do not explain themselves. Religious aesthetics are often so elaborated in themselves, that exposing an object in its context of usage and history, its cultural meaning, and its conditions of becoming a museal object presents a challenge. One impressive attempt to deal with these questions is the design of the exhibitions in the Jewish Museum Berlin, dedicated to German-Jewish history.<sup>38</sup> Its concept of using media and aesthetics as an adequate and heuristic representation of the different

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<sup>36</sup> See Gottfried Korff, “Das Popularisierungs-Dilemma,” *Museumskunde* 66 (2001), 13–20.

<sup>37</sup> See Bräunlein, “Zurück,” 27.

<sup>38</sup> See Sabine Offe, *Ausstellungen, Einstellungen, Entstellungen: Jüdische Museen in Deutschland und Österreich* (Berlin & Vienna: Philo-Verlag, 2000).

and problematic aspects of a (religious) tradition could be described as the consistent “aestheticisation of perspectivity.”

The multi-mediality of the presentation reflects the multi-mediality of Jewish tradition. Spoken words and sounds, texts, pictures, photos, cult objects, and video installations are adequately connected to aspects of Jewish culture in a way that the design comments and reflects on the subjects. The history of Judaism in Germany is thoroughly embedded in a history of knowledge. Contributions of Jewish culture to the production of knowledge are presented, as well as attitudes to knowledge in different areas and times of Jewish cultures. Knowledge is presented as an aesthetic process, for instance the display of a typical Talmud page as an interactive computer animation encourages reconstruction of the ancient text in the modern medium. A further strategy of reflecting explicitly on knowledge processes is the rubric “What we do not show” on the web page of the museum. Here, experts from different departments explain why certain things and themes cannot be found in the museum. That way, imparting knowledge integrates reflection on non-knowledge and giving reasons for distinguishing knowledge in the museum from religious knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

Another important device of the “aestheticisation of perspectivity” in this museum is its famous architecture. In a much discussed and elaborate manner, the architectural design corresponds to different aspects and times of German-Jewish history. As mentioned above, the museum explicitly refuses to mediate experience of ‘the holy’ or religious perceptions. But the architectural framing relies heavily on experience by confronting the visitors with aesthetic devices that influence the body, self-perception in the space of the museum, walking up or down crooked platforms, through narrow spaces constructed from different materials, all inducing aesthetic and bodily reactions. Every area, every opening presents a new challenge to the position of one’s own perspective. This mode of experience is so pervading that it is hardly possible to view the architecture as decoration, as addition to some ‘content,’ or to just ignore it. Aesthetics here influence the act of perception itself, and the intention of this design is: to be

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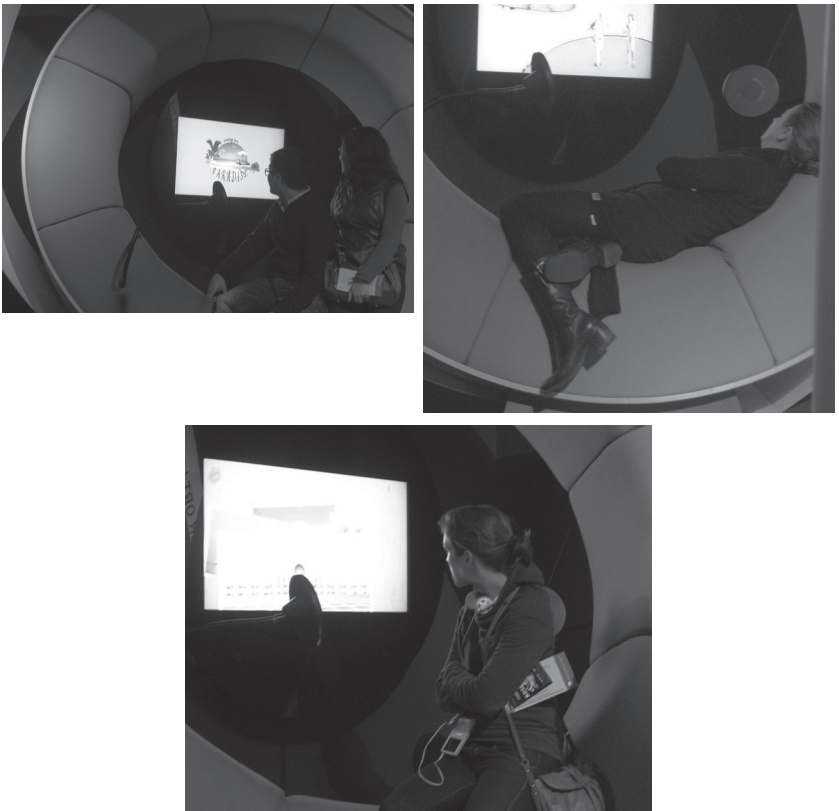
<sup>39</sup>) The rubric “What we do not show” is a good example for perspectivity as an explicitly reflective structure of exposing: It lays bare, that museums make ongoing decisions about their perspectives, in this case e.g. why anti-Semitic objects are not collected (= the museum is dedicated to a Jewish perspective, and anti-Semitism is a problem of a whole society) or why religious rituals are explained or represented by interviews, but not celebrated in the museum (= not a religious space, the private side of religion does not belong into the public sphere). See: [http://www.jmberlin.de/osk/wwwz\\_DE.php](http://www.jmberlin.de/osk/wwwz_DE.php) (accessed 4 November 2010).

recognised. No specific experience is addressed here for the presentation of religion. Rather, religion is presented within this setting of radical perspectivity, as an integral part of culture and interconnected to every possible experience or feeling.



**Fig. 2.** All the different devices and locations of knowledge production in the Jewish Museum in Berlin are framed by the architectural concept of radical perspectivity. The body and perception are turned into active parts of the knowledge process. Views through windows and the visitor's position in space evoke processes of self-perception which change, for example, when he finds himself alone or with a group of people in a room which is designed to evoke deprivation of stimuli, narrowness, coldness of the building material (concrete) and a certain quality of sound (room of contemplation). Religion in this setting is but one element which, apart from any specific 'religious experience', is integrated as one component of knowledge and experience. © private.

Parallel to the challenging design of perspectives, there are also sections of the museum which feature less tension and easier accessibility. The corner in which different religious traditions are compared, is embedded in, but in contrast to, the architectural framework. The video installations are organised like in a cosy private living room, where you can behave as you want and relax while watching the films. This arrangement is a good example for the privatisation and personalisation of knowledge impartation and for shifts between the private and the public realm.



**Fig. 3.** Areas of relaxed knowledge reception, such as here in the section for the comparison of different “Matters of Faith,” not only provide alternative didactic situations and a relaxation from the more challenging presentation designs. Rather, notions of personal, individualised knowledge and abstract, institutionalised knowledge are interconnected by associating knowledge perception with different surroundings and bodily positions. The qualities of

**Fig. 3. (Continued)**

the public and the private are rhetorical devices which developed from a shift of knowledge between these areas. Through media changes, the imparting of knowledge moved from museums into theatres and cinemas, and from there to living rooms. So did museality, which can be found as edutainment on TV or as an element of home design (the Buddha statue, the shrines of travel memories, and the Zen garden). In turn, the behaviours and rituals of the living room moved back into the museums as the habitus of media consumption, including rituality and feelings of leisure time when lying on the sofa, relaxing the muscles, thinking and feeling differently about what one perceives than in school. Dealing with religion in this way, in contrast to admiration or devotion or at least attitudes of respect and sincerity, is relatively new. Bodily behaviour and the design of perception here represents the circulation of knowledge between different social areas and roles, and it also shows how attitudes towards religion are created, oscillating between the individual realm and social institutions. © private.

### **9. Polemics of Light: Religious Aesthetics, Popular Knowledge, and Museality as Interpretational Option**

The last example is not one of intentional strategies in museums, but of museality as an element of knowledge discourses in the public sphere. Tourism is an arena which has fostered educational knowledge about foreign cultures and religions. In travel guides and online-sources, by visiting certain places and buildings, and in connection with the UNESCO World Heritage project, museality has become a mode of perception which does not need a museum any more, a mode of perceiving religion as exhibited outside of museums. Just like museums, tourism provides an alternative source of knowledge about religion that is different from religious knowledge, and therefore an interest in religion which is not necessarily religious. This modern attitude towards religion sometimes conflicts with indigenous and religious claims on the usage and perception of these places. Museality has become an argument within this conflict, and we can observe forms of competition between religious and museal knowledge.

Many religious buildings have signs reminding visitors that they are *not* museums, but places of worship which require a certain behaviour and respect. Special cases are buildings which were rededicated by the victors in historical situations, such as the Hagia Sophia, which was built as a church,



then used as a mosque, and is now a museum. Another case is the so-called ‘Mesquita-Cathedral’ of Cordoba.<sup>40</sup> This distinctive Islamic building with the famous ‘forest of columns’ was restructured after the reconquest, and during the Renaissance a large cathedral was built in the middle of the mosque complex. The cathedral is still used as a Christian church, but has also been a World Heritage Site since 1994 and thousands of people visit the building as a tourist attraction. The flyer for tourists notes that this (whole) building is a church and not a museum. But people do visit the building like a museum, while others use it as a church and again others show signs of Muslim devotion. Discussions about inter-religious usage are going on.<sup>41</sup> On tourist websites and in travel guides, knowledge about the architecture and history of the building is intertwined with judgements about the religious history of the building. Two examples should demonstrate how aesthetic effects, religious claims and the circulation of knowledge come into contact through popular interpretations. First someone gives an introduction to the history of the site:

The most striking thing about the Mezquita is that, incongruously, the ‘mosque’ contains a Christian church (Cordoba’s cathedral). What one sees from outside is confusing indeed: a huge, flat-roofed low-lying square building with a gigantic baroque church jutting up in the middle like a rather unsightly stone wedding-cake.

But before joining the politically-correct chorus which loves to bemoan this Christian crime against Moorish art (which, undoubtedly, it is), consider the chequered and equally ‘criminal’ past of this sacred site from the very beginning.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> This combined name is informally used by many in current debates. The church-given name of the building is *Catedral de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción* (*Cathedral of Our Lady of the Assumption*), which was formerly the Great Mosque of Córdoba, or the Mezquita.

<sup>41</sup> Especially since some Muslims prayed in the building, see for example the report on the website of the US American Association for Catholic Information in 2007 [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/during\\_summit\\_on\\_islamophobia\\_muslims\\_demand\\_use\\_of\\_cathedral\\_of\\_cordoba\\_for\\_religious\\_services/](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/during_summit_on_islamophobia_muslims_demand_use_of_cathedral_of_cordoba_for_religious_services/) (accessed 10 June 2010), and more recently, in April 2010: “Muslims arrested for trying to pray in Cordobas former Great Mosque”, *The Times*: <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article7085695.ece> (accessed 10 June 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Touristic website: <http://www.andalucia.com/cities/cordoba/mosque2.htm>, (accessed 4 March 2010).

Here the self-organised popularisation of knowledge about the history of architecture and religion takes sides and uses the differentiation between religion and art to produce a judgement of ‘criminality.’ It is not Christian art versus Moorish art, but (Christian) religion versus (Moorish) art which informs this interpretation of the history of the site, supported by the judgement about ‘confusing aesthetics’.

What is in fact striking in the building is the perception of light. The low-ceilinged mosque architecture differs very much from the high Renaissance building, but the effect of light and darkness is not just due to the different periods and styles of architecture. The Christian modifications of the building actively worked with this rhetoric of light. Most of the windows and doors of the mosque were bricked up, so that the high, white room of the cathedral, letting in the bright sunlight and reflecting the gold-covered interior, contrasts sharply with the low, dark part of the mosque.



**Fig. 4.** The ‘Mezquita-Cathedral’ of Cordoba is a significant example of aesthetic polemics in religious architecture. Beyond the different styles of architecture (eighth century versus fifteenth–seventeenth centuries), today the use

**Fig. 4. (Continued)**

of light supports notions of implicit knowledge, connected to the ‘darkness of the old’ and ‘brightness of the modern.’ In addition, modernity, reason, and progress are connected in Europe with ‘enlightenment,’ ‘clearness,’ and ‘insight’—all visual metaphors which equate light with knowledge. Christian architects bricked up the large arched windows which opened the Muslim building to the patio with the cooling effect we know from other examples of Arabic architecture, playing with heat, water, and ventilation. Chapels, altars, and large Christian pictures were placed within the arches. Stepping from the dark, low area into the bright cathedral dazzles the eyes and evokes sensations of monumentality, connected to a different way of breathing, looking up, and feeling different in space. How one values these effects and emotions depends on one’s prior attitudes and whether one perceives the site as religious or museal. Reading travel guides and listening to visitors, the arrangement seems to suggest notions of a dark, backward Islam and an ‘enlightened’ Christianity, but at the same time, these aesthetics and historical knowledge about them evoke sympathy with the aesthetically more ‘modest’ Islam and the desire for a more tolerant attitude in the museal space. © with kind permission from <http://www.artencordoba.com>; and official flyer, distributed in the Mezquita-Cathedral in Cordoba, related website: <http://www.catedraldecordoba.es>

Whether deliberately or not, museality as a mode of perception addresses different qualities of knowledge. “Double exposure” in the sense of Mieke Bal here means that the church not only preserves an architectural heritage, but also exposes a certain polemic rhetoric against the competing religion of Islam. No matter how the contemporary population perceived these effects and whether they had more practical than polemical interests, today our tacit aesthetic knowledge is part of the polemic debate about Islam and embodied representations and stereotypes of the ‘other.’ In the current conflicts about the use of the building, the church claims to be the proper preserver and custodian of the Islamic building, but equally refuses to be a museum. At the same time visitors are free to decide on their own how they will use and perceive the building. Museality in this case is an option to see this site as a religious *and* culturally coded location, implementing notions of plurality and tolerance. This popular interpretation of knowledge and aesthetics is found in media like “Lonely Planet” and in communicational practice. It is not planned or institutionally intended, it cannot be controlled, and it uses museality as a cultural matrix

for circulating knowledge and for a certain behaviour towards religion and its role in modern societies.

## 10. Conclusion

Combining the concept of museality with the history and dynamics of knowledge proves to be a promising heuristic tool for detecting and explaining interactions in the religious field. As an analytical pattern of the aesthetics of religion it makes clear how in many, and often surprising, ways religion is involved in processes and practices of knowledge production, reception and circulation. Viewing museality as an analytical instrument as well as a matrix of behaviour and perception in cultural practice has a connective potential not only for academic research on religion, but also for trans-disciplinary cooperation between the study of religion and museums. Theoretical reflection and aesthetic communication in exhibitions could learn and profit from each other, and this is especially important with regard to the current debates about the globalisation of knowledge and the role of religion in societies. Regarding themselves as information or knowledge societies, the cultures of the West are witnessing a change in the functions and distribution of knowledge. Whether they really are societies based on knowledge (and if, what kind of knowledge?) and what this means between tendencies towards the democratisation and decentralisation of knowledge production on the one hand, and hegemonic dominance on the other, are important questions.

The present perspective makes it possible to see how the changes in media and knowledge are interconnected with changes in religion. Since they usually have seen religion as being in a process of decline and *per se* museal in the outmoded sense, Western societies are surprised at the vitality of religion in modernity. If museums become places of reflection on, and experience of, the intense entanglement of cultures in the present-day world, they may turn out to be more than simply brokers of information and knowledge. Knowing the impact museal representation has on the history of religion—as a repertoire of new religious interpretations or as a provider of knowledge about religion—exhibiting religion is a responsible and an important task. Which kinds of knowledge are needed in society does not determine which kinds of knowledge are fostered. Museums can influence these decisions, and they can be important agents in providing

options to deal with religion: as locations, as opportunities for experience, and as changing patterns of perception and action.

For the study of religion, describing and critically analysing these practices is as important as producing relevant knowledge in this realm. There are rich traditions in the production of religious knowledge in Europe, and a vast expertise in scientific knowledge, but there is not yet much experience with making scientific knowledge about religion a lively part of debates and aesthetics which influence cultural life.

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