Narrating Dutch Christianity: Secularism, Heritage, and Identity in Museum Catharijneconvent

Jerrold Cuperus

Abstract

This article analyzes how a Dutch museum for Christian heritage uses objects to construct narratives about the entanglements of Christianity and Dutch history. The exhibition "Christianity in the Netherlands" presents a specific postsecular narrative, which positions its audience in a political discourse that emphasizes the Christian tradition of the Netherlands, but is potentially exclusionary to part of its audience. This article analyzes the exhibition and argues that viewing practices, and the sacralization of art and heritage figure into the construction of a national Dutch identity which privileges a specific cultural form of Christianity.

Introduction

"The idols come down, struck by Martin's axe. Let nobody believe those are gods, who so easily fall."[1] This inscription is found on the exterior of the Hammer of Saint Martin, a relic from Saint Martin's Cathedral, locally known as the *Domkerk*, in the Dutch city of Utrecht. It refers to the life story of the fourth-century bishop of Tours, who allegedly used this instrument to cut down a pagan tree (Vos 204). The hammer consists of a greenish serpentine rock, axe-shaped on one side and blunt on the other, on a wooden beam, fully encased in silver. Whereas the silver casing was likely added in the fourteenth century, the hammerhead stems from around 1000 B.C. and is largely intact, leading experts to believe that it did not function as an axe but was likely used as a pagan ritual object (De Kruijff 97).

Objects and images are vehicles of contestations; struggles over their meaning, ownership, and value have pervaded history, often expressed in iconoclasms (Morgan, *Force of Vision* 22). The story of the hammer illustrates how a pagan symbol and its very antithesis in the form of a pagan icon destroyer, can come together in the same object. While the casing and the inscription have locked the iconoclastic meaning in the object, its previous significance lies just below the surface. Today, the hammer is not part of an Iron Age burial site, or a Medieval church, but of a contemporary 'temple' (Latour 69): the national museum for Christian heritage, Catharijneconvent in Utrecht. Featuring in different exhibitions, the hammer tells various stories. In the winter of 2018, it was displayed in an exhibition about relics where the accompanying plaque described how the hammer used to travel across the country so people could worship it in their own churches. In 2017, it was placed in a Catharijneconvent exhibition about reformation theologian Martin Luther, to show how Luther named himself after the bishop of Tours and patron saint of Utrecht. The hammer is part of the "Canon of Dutch history," the official narrative of Dutch history as taught in secondary education. Referring to the previously mentioned inscription, in the Dutch Canon the hammer represents the story of how the Neth-

[1] Original: "De afgodsbeelden storten neer, getroffen door de bijl van Martinus. Laat niemand geloven dat zij, die zo gemakkelijk neerstorten, goden zijn" (Raaijmakers 10).

erlands were christened in the early Middle Ages. Together, these stories are used to construct a specific narrative about the history of Dutch Christianity.

In the permanent exhibition "Christianity in the Netherlands," the Catharijneconvent has gathered numerous relics, paintings, and other artifacts representing parts of Dutch history. Presenting a history of Christianity's influence in the Netherlands, from its seventh-century christening up to the present day, the national museum uses this exhibition for educational purposes. As an institution funded by the Dutch Ministry of Education and Culture, the museum has to appeal to a broad audience, and has to position itself in a context in which citizenship and belonging are increasingly expressed in cultural terms (Duyvendak et al. 3). The Christian background of the museum is in tension with funding from a secular state, which is reflected by the assemblage of objects and images in the exhibition through its theme and intended audience. Analyzing the aforementioned permanent exhibition in congruence with the museum's policies, I will show how the museum constructs its audience, which is assumed to have moved 'beyond' religion and to be in need of education about how their history is rooted in religious tradition. Examining the exhibition and its narratives from a material perspective, situated in a religious studies and secular studies framework, helps to understand how audiences are positioned through interactions with the objects they encounter. Asking how the exhibition portrays its audience as part of a specific history, and how identity and religiosity are negotiated in the institutional context of the museum, I argue that the exhibition assumes a postsecular perspective, a position which claims to be neutral towards religion but actually informs religious practices.

Sacralizing Sovereignty

From the early 1960s, many statues, images, and other works of art were expelled from Roman Catholic churches as the result of changing religious and liturgical practices. Simultaneously, various Protestant and Catholic churches closed down due to a decline in church attend-

ance. These processes led to the creation of a national museum for religious heritage, in an attempt to safeguard artifacts from these churches (Van den Hout 437). The museum is in part founded on the assumption that religiosity would eventually disappear, and it is still very much influenced by that idea: the museum policy posits that "for a growing number of people, the religious meaning of [Christian heritage] is diminishing while the cultural meaning increases."[2] Heritage scholar Regina Bendix argues that the threat of loss is instrumental to the creation of heritage (254). The creation of this specific form of national heritage is thus tied to the perceived 'secularization' of the Netherlands, and the supposed loss of its Christian roots.

The 'secular,' in close association with its '-ism' and '-ization,' is conceptually based on a dualistic opposition to 'religious.' Being the Other of religion, as sociologist José Casanova puts it, the 'secular' has become increasingly connotated with "that [which] remains when the religious is lifted or disappears" (55). Although its roots lie in the Latin word *saeculum*, meaning a period of time like a century or an age, the secular has become increasingly connotated with space. In the French model of secularism, *laïcité*, religious expressions and institutional influences of religion have to be extracted from public spaces (Casanova 57). The 'separation of church and state,' and specifically the French model, has been critiqued by scholars who argue that state and church have historically depended on each other for authority and legitimacy. Johnson et al. for example argue that churches have depended on states for protection of infrastructure, legal rights, and finances. State sovereignty, on the other hand, has been historically legitimized by resorting to an authentic tradition which binds constituents together (4). This was taken from the national church, sovereignty being a theological concept (Asad). In a context where the influence of a national church is declining or altogether absent, the state has to find other means to ensure socio-cultural unity. This is where the museum plays a large role.

The Catharijneconvent showcases the long-lasting entanglements between religion and politics throughout its exhibition "Christianity in the

[2] Original: "Voor een groeiend aantal mensen heeft [Christelijk erfgoed] steeds minder een religieuze betekenis, en steeds meer een culturele" (Catharijneconvent 5).

Netherlands." The painting *Allegory on the Tyranny of Alva* illustrates this. It depicts the Spanish (Catholic) occupier of the Netherlands and his companions being crowned by the devil and repressing the rights of the Dutch during the Eighty Years' War. Another example is a nineteenth-century cartoon featured in the exhibition, which depicts how the then recently constitutionalized separation of church and state was seen as a literal attack on the (up until then Protestant) University of Utrecht. It criticizes the state for allowing Roman Catholicism to re-establish, which was seen as opening up to the political influence of Rome. This shows how the separation between church and state was not considered to be a positive development by everyone. The Catharijneconvent visualizes how religion is historically tied to state sovereignty, and in this process they partly assume the role of the church in prolonging the legitimacy of the state by using similar visual regimes.

Visual studies scholar David Morgan argues that the fine arts, through their aesthetic features and the social background against which they are displayed, have a certain spiritual value. Set apart in a museum, these objects are endowed with "a capacity for revelation by virtue of its accentuation as special objects and its effect on the people who admire it" ("Defining the Sacred" 650). As "special objects" with a capacity for "revelation," fine art and objects of devotion are similar, as both are subject to sacralization. The Catharijneconvent places religious-political objects alongside devotional objects, which puts them in a similar framework and, drawing on the same visual language, thus allows for both kinds of objects to be sacralized. Showing the entanglements between religion and politics, the museum is both able to comment on its own position as a state-funded museum with a Christian background, while simultaneously legitimizing state sovereignty by reusing the visual language of Christianity which has previously contributed to this legitimacy. It preserves the traditions and practices of Dutch Christianity by means of documentation and presentation.

Emphasizing and sacralizing Christianity as national tradition figures into a problematic political, particularly right-wing conservative, discourse which uses terms like 'Judeo-Christian tradition' or 'values' and equates them to so-called 'secular values' (Van den Hemel). The

term 'Judeo-Christian' originated in nineteenth-century German theology and was institutionalized in the field of philology, where 'Judeo-Christianity' was seen as the Semitic form of Christianity, a subordinate tradition to the Aryan-European 'Pauline Christianity' (Topolski 272). In the 1930s, the concept 'Judeo-Christian' gained a different meaning when it was used in the United States to combat rising anti-Semitism, and later communism (Van den Hemel 60). The contents of those concepts assumed under the denominator 'Judeo-Christian' have changed over time, which naturally means that its projected enemy has changed with it. Its contemporary use, emphasizing "secular values" (63), imagines a set of inferior values which are mostly attributed to Islamic Others, making 'Judeo-Christian' an inherently exclusionary concept. The politicization of Christianity as culture and identity, which is both nuanced and narrativized in the Catharijneconvent exhibition, reifies these political discourses about Judeo-Christianity and its connotations. Building on the legitimizing capacity of the church, the museum is able to influence national identity formation through objects.

Positioning the Audience

"[We] offer space to different interpretations and experiences, and do not push a specific ideology or one-sided image of history,"[3] the Catharijneconvent notes in their policy. The now-former director of the museum described its audience, after the 2006 opening of the aforementioned exhibition, as broad and art-loving: "Christians will discover their roots, and the exhibitions can help meet their need and desire for information, spirituality, and the sense of artistic beauty. Nonbelievers will be given information, and be impressed by the beauty of Christian art" (Van den Hout 439). In museums, publics, ideologies, and identities are mediated by heritage, defined as a "discursive realm that privileges certain vocabularies and certain modes of argumentation" (Van de Port and Meyer 12). Heritage, which in the Catharijneconvent takes on the

[3] Original: "Museum Catharijneconvent biedt daarom ruimte aan verschillende interpretaties en ervaringen, en dringt geen denkrichting of eenzijdig beeld van de geschiedenis op" (Catharijneconvent 5).

form of Christian art, closely connects to the 'postsecular' described by philosophers Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, which privileges 'secular reasoning' as a mode of argumentation over other vocabularies.

Habermas defines the postsecular as a "change in consciousness" regarding the position of religion in contemporary Western societies (19). Habermas locates this change primarily in Western-European countries and argues that it surfaces in a context where an apparent 'resurgence' of religion takes place; a counter-intuitive realization in light of the "secularization thesis," which posited that rational thinking and science would lead to the eventual disappearance of religion (Berger). The term 'postsecular' could thus be defined as an increasing awareness of the presence of religion in the public sphere. As Charles Taylor summarizes, Rawls argues that the public sphere is a realm for debate which requires a neutral language available to everyone. Rawls contends that secular reason is the basis for a proper language in which every member of the public who engages in debate should be able to correspond (49). Habermas's position is similar, although he argues that an effort is also required from non-religious citizens to engage in religious discourse, to prevent religious citizens from being set aside as second-class or not fully part of the public (Habermas 29).

A postsecular society, privileging 'neutral' public debate, even while being aware of the persistence of religion in public life, does not always work out in practice. First of all, because a truly neutral language does not exist, as every debate is situated and informed by previous discussions. Secular language, moreover, is subject to a history of exclusions, and also informs a specific mode of thinking. Feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott has coined the term 'sexularism,' for example, to show how "gender inequality was fundamental to the articulation of the separation of church and state that inaugurated Western modernity" (3). The "feminine trait" of spirituality has been relegated to the "feminine sphere" of the private, she argues, whereas the "masculine virtue" of rationality predominantly occupies the public sphere (181). What this example shows is that the secular is not a neutral sphere of life, but part of a political discourse which shapes public expressions of identity. The equation of rational discourse with secularism is exclusionary in various

ways and, as anthropologist Saba Mahmood puts it, "generates these very spheres, establishes their boundaries, and suffuses them with content, such that they acquire a neutral quality for those living within its terms" (3). Both heritage and the postsecular are thus able to shape religious and cultural practices.

In the final section of the exhibition, called "Liberation and Contemplation" ("Bevrijding en Bezinning"), this becomes especially clear. Here, the history of Dutch Christianity from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day is detailed, a time when church attendance was in decline and vast societal and demographic changes were taking place. During this period, the welfare state gradually replaced the Dutch pillarized society, in which social institutions from schools to healthcare, and even the local bakery one visited, were largely divided on the basis of worldview or religious denomination: Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Socialist (Kennedy and Zwemer 253). Concurrent with these changes, an artistic movement arose which was both critical of and nostalgic towards Christian imagery. Artists like Jacques Frenken and Joost van den Toorn were inspired by Roman Catholic material devotion and adapted images and statues into works of art, which was not always appreciated. The 1965 statue *Blue Madonna*, which Frenken assembled by sawing statues of Mary in pieces and arranging them in such a way as to create a mise en abyme (Droste) effect, is a pertinent example of an image which instantly evokes the "blasphemous" process of creating the artwork (De Wal 96). Fashion designer Aziz Bekkaoui designed clothes resembling priestly gowns, drawing inspiration from Roman Catholicism. Whereas the visibility of Islam and other religious or spiritual movements in Dutch society might be increasing, Christianity remains visible primarily as inspiration for art, and is thereby relegated to the realm of 'culture.'

Building on a tradition, and narrativizing this tradition in the halls of the museum, entails the construction of a broad audience, as seen in the explicit inclusion of both Christians and nonbelievers quoted by the former director. Assuming that people without a Christian background are still able to appreciate Christian heritage, not just as art but also because of the histories that connect the audience to the objects on display,

the narrative effectively places non-Christians in the history they are told about. Aided by the fact that museum plaques and other information holders in this specific exhibition are in Dutch, the museum constructs their audience as Dutch with Christian roots, hereby presuming that both Christians and non-Christians are interested in learning about these roots. Simultaneously, however, these artworks also position the religious audience with respect to Christianity. Bekkaoui makes clerical 'fashion' accessible to the unanointed and thereby profanes the imagery, and Frenken shows how Mary is nothing more than a wooden statue which can be serrated in half and placed in an iconoclastic assemblage. There is a dual message in the exhibition, which glorifies Christianity as a Dutch tradition, but also presents Christianity as a nostalgic past. The narrative presents Christians as part of a history which has transformed their religion into culture. Assignation of identity through the narrative device of the exhibition positions the viewer, even if the museum is respectful of its audience in terms of personal beliefs and convictions.

Conclusion

In the Catharijneconvent, art and heritage are sacralized in a similar way to devotional images in churches. What the objects in the museum mediate is very different. By creating an audience and a narrative about Dutch Christianity, as part of a history which eventually relegates Christianity to the realm of culture, the museum implicitly excludes both Christians and others from identifying with the narrative presented. In the wake of the closing of church buildings and declining religious affiliation, the state remains in need of historic legitimacy, which finds continuation within the museum walls. Examining art, heritage, and religion through a framework of sacralization helps to understand meanings placed in objects and images in both political and social realms.

The hammer of Saint Martin stands out because it is able to tell so many stories about Dutch history. Since no records of it exist between 1507 and the early twentieth century, the historical whereabouts of the hammer remain unclear during an especially tumultuous time in Dutch

Christianity (De Kruijff 97). The vast usages of this object in many exhibitions shows how the stories that are told in the museum reflect current ideas of history and identity. The objects might have different stories to tell in the future.

Biography

Jerrold Cuperus has a bachelor's degree in Language and Culture Studies (Utrecht University), and is a Research Master student of Religious Studies at Utrecht University. He is currently researching economies of Christian heritage in commercial markets, churches, and museums in the Netherlands.

Works Cited

Asad, Talal. "A Thought-Provoking Study." *The Immanent Frame*, tif.ssrc.org.

Bendix, Regina. "Heritage between Economy and Politics: An Assessment from the Perspective of Cultural Anthropology." *Intangible Heritage*, edited by Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa, Routledge 2009, pp. 253-69.

Berger, Peter L. "Six Decades as a Worldwide Religion Watcher: Observations and Lessons Learned." *Faith Angle Forum*, eppc.org.

Casanova, José. "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms." *Rethinking Secularism*, edited by Craig Calhoun et al., Oxford UP, 2011, pp. 54-74.

Catharijneconvent. "Beleidsplan 2017-2020." *Museum Catharijneconvent*, catharijneconvent.nl.

Duyvendak, Jan-Willem et al. *The Culturalization of Citizenship: Belonging and Polarization in a Globalizing World*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Habermas, Jürgen. "Notes on Post-Secular Society." *New Perspectives Quarterly*, vol. 25, no. 4, 2008, pp. 17-29.

Hemel, Ernst van den. "(Pro)claiming Tradition: The 'Judeo-Christian' Roots of Dutch Society and the Rise of Conservative Nationalism." *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere*, edited by Rosi Braidotti et al., Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 53-76.

Hout, Guus van den. "Museum Catharijneconvent, the Museum for Christian Art and Culture of the Netherlands on the Verge of a New Era…." *Material Religion*, vol. 3, no. 3, 2007, pp. 437-40.

Johnson, Paul Christopher et al. *Ekklesia: Three Inquiries in Church and State*. U of Chicago P, 2018.

Kennedy, James C. and Jan P. Zwemer. "Religion in the Modern Netherlands and the Problems of Pluralism." *BMGN: Low Countries Historical Review*, vol. 125, no. 2-3, 2010, pp. 237-68.

Kruijff, Anique de. *Miraculeus Bewaard. Middeleeuwse Utrechtse Relieken op Reis: De Schat van de Oudkatholieke Gertrudiskathedraal*. Walburg Pers, 2011.

Latour, Bruno. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Duke UP, 2010.

Mahmood, Saba. *Religious Difference in a Secular Age: A Minority Report*. Princeton UP, 2016.

Morgan, David. *The Force of Vision: A Visual History of Modern Christianity*. U of California P, 2015.

—. "Defining the Sacred in Fine Art and Devotional Imagery." *Religion*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2017, pp. 641-62.

Port, Mattijs van de, and Birgit Meyer. "Heritage Dynamics: Politics of Authentication, Aesthetics of Persuasion and the Cultural Production of the Real." *Sense and Essence: Heritage and the Cultural Production of the Real*, 2018, pp. 1-41.

Raaijmakers, Janneke. "Woord en Wapen." *Christendom in Nederland: Topstukken uit het Catharijneconvent*, edited by Saskia van Haaren, Waanders, 2006, pp. 10-17.

Scott, Joan Wallach. *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton UP, 2018.

Taylor, Charles. "Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism." *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, edited by Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan van Antwerpen, Columbia UP, 2011, pp. 34-59.

Topolski, Anya. "A Genealogy of the 'Judeo-Christian' Signifier: A Tale of Europe's Identity Crisis." *Is There a Judeo-Christian Tradition? A European Perspective*, De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 267-84.

Vos, Nienke. "The Saint as Icon: Transformation of Biblical Imagery in Early Medieval Hagiography." *Iconoclasm and Iconoclash: Struggle for Religious Identity*, edited by Willem van Asselt et al., Brill, 2007, pp. 201-16.

Wal, Joost de. "Bevrijding en Bezinning." *Christendom in Nederland: Topstukken uit het Catharijneconvent*, edited by Saskia van Haaren, Waanders, 2006, pp. 92-101.