

# SACRED ENTANGLEMENTS

studying interactions between visitors, objects  
and religion in the museum

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# ABSTRACT

The study of religious dimensions of visitor experiences in public museums is an under-researched area, partly because of assumptions of the secular nature of the museum space, the dominant assumptions and methods of museum evaluation studies and the relative lack of study of material religion in public spaces not intended to be devotional. This project addresses this by examining the processes through which visitors experience sacred presences in the museum.

This research employed Actor Network Theory (Latour 2004) in order to decentre the more prominent components within visitor studies and evaluations (such as the visitor). Using ANT, this study conceives religious interactions as networks that combine objects, people and divine/supernatural presences, all of which have the capacity to affect the network. This network approach was then used to explore and analyse interactions at two religious-themed exhibitions at the British Museum, and the religious tour groups that visit its permanent galleries.

The study found that the sacred was evoked in a number of ways in the museum; through embodied interactions with artefacts, as memories, and through engagements with scripture. Each encounter had to negotiate an array of actors that were both present and absent within the museum space. These actors, which had the ability to facilitate and inhibit visitors' religious experiences, included elements often overlooked by museum professionals and within visitor studies (such as overheard comments and glass display cases). The findings also revealed how perceptions of the museum as secular shaped visitor norms and thereby influenced whether the museum became a site of conflict or opportunity for sacred encounters. Furthermore, the research demonstrated the limited capacity of museum staff to influence visitors' interactions as, irrespective of the museum's intentions, the commingling of certain objects, spaces and visitors can facilitate experiences of the divine.

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# CONTENTS

Abstract .....	1
Acknowledgments .....	2
Contents .....	3
Table of Figures .....	4
Chapter One: Introduction .....	5
<b>Part One:</b> History, Theory and Methodology .....	15
Chapter Two: Museums, Visitors and Religion .....	16
Chapter Three: Materiality, Religion and Agency .....	44
Chapter Four: Methodology .....	73
<b>Part Two:</b> Findings .....	95
Chapter Five: Treasures of Heaven.....	97
Chapter Six: Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam.....	136
Chapter Seven: The Bible Tours.....	176
Chapter Eight: Conclusion .....	211
References.....	234
Appendices .....	260

## TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The British Museum (Butler 1853).....	15
Figure 2: Reliquaries in cases (Trustees of the British Museum, 2011a) .....	97
Figure 3: Saint Baudime reliquary (Trustees of the British Museum, 2011b) .....	99
Figure 4: Saint Blaise reliquary (BriFili Stating 2011) .....	100
Figure 5: The Mandylion (Telegraph 2011a).....	103
Figure 6: The Mandylion in the exhibition (Trustees of the British Museum 2011c).....	103
Figure 7: A sign outside the Shrine of Edward the Confessor, Westminster Abbey (Berns 2012a) .	116
Figure 8: Signs (in waiting) at Canterbury Cathedral (Normann 2003) .....	116
Figure 9: Postcards in the Museum shop (Berns 2011a) .....	127
Figure 10: Reliquary pendant (Trustees of the British Museum n.d.).....	130
Figure 11: The reliquary (centre) during the service (Khasaia 2012) .....	130
Figure 12: 'Preparing for Hajj' (Trustees of the British Museum 2012a) .....	138
Figure 13: 'Mecca the Blessed' (Trustees of the British Museum 2012b) .....	138
Figure 14: The sitara (Berns 2012b).....	139
Figure 15: Visitors watching the film (Trustees of the British Museum 2012c) .....	151
Figure 16: Entrance to the exhibition (Trustees of the British Museum 2012d) .....	157
Figure 17: MFR with the qibla protruding on the left (Berns 2012c).....	166
Figure 18: Passersby looking into the MFR (Berns 2012d) .....	168
Figure 19: Qibla in the MFR (Berns 2012e).....	170
Figure 20: Tour guide holding his Bible (Berns 2011b) .....	180
Figure 21: Jay Smith discussing a panel (Fillymonn 2008) .....	186
Figure 22: Phoenician plaque (Berns 2011c) .....	187
Figure 23: Statue of Sekhmet (Lenka P 2008).....	188
Figure 24: Pope Benedict XVI with a sunburst monstrance (Telegraph 2011b).....	188
Figure 25: Bible tour name badge (Berns 2011d).....	192
Figure 26: Body of a Late-Predynastic Egyptian man (Berns 2011e) .....	206

## chapter one: INTRODUCTION

At the Indianapolis Museum of Art's exhibition *Sacred Spain*, which explored the Catholic art of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spain and Latin America, staff observed a number of visitors crying in the galleries.<sup>1</sup> The visitors' emotional responses to the objects even led one of the museum's education guides to consider halting her commentary "so as not to disturb them" (Cummings 2009). The religious paintings and sculptures also prompted what curatorial assistant, Rebecca Long (2011) described as "several security incidents" with "visitors trying to touch one prominent object in the exhibition". The prominent object in question was a life-size and life-like figure of Christ, known as Cristo Yacente ('Dead Christ'). The blooded corpse, in painted wood, sat on a roped-off table at the centre of a red-walled gallery. The museum staff did not anticipate such embodied and emotional responses from its attendees. These sculptures and paintings had produced a reaction in some of its visitors that was more common to a place of worship than a public museum.

The exhibition's senior curator, Ronda Kasl, commented that the exhibition featured "works of art that were created with explicit responsive goals... [and] were meant to arouse wonder, devotion and identification". Speaking ahead of its opening, Kasl stated that she hoped "that viewers will be moved by the sheer visual impact of these works" (IMA 2009). However, the power of these objects was not only in their visual impact, but in their ability to focus and mediate the sacred power of the divine. The museum's responses demonstrated the boundaries and blurred nature of what is permissible and impermissible within the galleries. The curators wanted people to be affected by the objects, but not to touch. What would be allowed, accepted and even expected in Spain, where this object is carried within Good Friday processions, was now a "security incident". The staff's reaction (and description) of the behaviours witnessed at *Sacred Spain* revealed an underlying conflict within the museum in regard to the performance of devotional acts and their associated emotional, embodied and material practices.

At the British Museum's exhibition *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* in 2011, I observed similar acts of devotion.<sup>2</sup> On one such occasion, I noticed a woman, standing by a relic of Christ, holding a prayer book. Positioned at the side of the

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<sup>1</sup> The exhibition, at the Indianapolis Museum of Art (USA), ran from 11 October 2009 to 3 January 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The exhibition ran from 26 June to 9 October 2011 and was curated by James Robinson.

case with her eyes downcast, she stood there for over half-an-hour. During this time another visitor approached me. Pointing to the woman with the prayer book, this other visitor whispered that she was “acting very strange”. “She has a book with her”, the visitor said, “but she’s not reading. She’s not even looking at the object.” Describing the woman’s conduct as “very disconcerting”, the visitor exclaimed that this was a museum and “not a church!”. For this visitor, the woman’s conduct around the relic was not only unexpected, it was unacceptable. A boundary had been crossed.

The woman holding the prayer book was Russian Orthodox and regularly visited the relic of Christ in order to venerate. The relic, which was on loan from the Vatican, held great importance for her and many of her Orthodox friends had asked her to pray for them at the object. Despite being accustomed to veneration, the Orthodox visitor admitted feeling particularly self-conscious about venerating at the exhibition. “It’s definitely difficult”, she told me.

It’s difficult because people come by, they wonder ‘what is she doing?’, ‘what is she reading?’, ‘I wonder why she’s standing there so long’, so you feel distracted a bit. Although we try to stand somewhere on the side, but still, obviously, you want to see the image of the Lord.

Conscious that her behaviour may invite unwarranted attention, the Orthodox visitor toned down her embodied practice of venerating the relic. This visitor regarded her physical and devotional interactions as out of keeping with the perceived social norms of the museum. These responses not only suggested that religious practices incorporating museum objects were out of place in a museum, they implied that such activities deviate from the expected and accepted ways visitors interact with the displayed objects.

The perception that religious practices are atypical for museums suggest that they do not (ordinarily) take place. Because of this view, religious performances and beliefs have received very little attention within the study of museum visitors. Similarly, within religious studies, museums are rarely considered as sites of devotional activities. Despite the fact that many museums display objects associated with religion, divine and spiritual presences are seldom mentioned in academic research or in museums’ visitor evaluation reports. It is as if the doors of the museum are shut to the reality of religious beings, marking a boundary that sets the museum apart from present-day practices of religion. Only the materials are allowed to dwell within the galleries, not their spiritual counterparts and definitely not the practices that may evoke them. It is, instead, within works of fiction that we find the museum enchanted by the spectres of past cultures.<sup>3</sup> Often this is attributed to the fact that the artefacts are perceived

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Mark Twain’s (1899) ‘A Ghost Story’, Don Marquis’ (1931) *Archy and Mehitabel* and Milan Trenc’s (1993) *The Night at the Museum*.

as being detached from the contexts that gave these objects *life*. But this exclusion of the divine and supernatural entities also mirrors a tendency within academia and museum practice to interpret actions from a rationalist, dematerialised and ‘Enlightened’ position. This thesis takes up the challenge of asking why religious practices involving objects and spiritual beings are so absent in museum visitor studies and proposes a way of thinking about, observing and describing these encounters.

In this research, I present a way to examine visitors’ encounters with divine and supernatural presences as interactions situated within the museum’s material environment. In doing so, I perceive objects as active agents in engagements with religious and spiritual evocations. Material ‘things’ are what makes these immaterial encounters palpable, knowable, visible and – to use Birgit Meyer’s (2009) term – ‘sense-able’. Taking a ‘thing-focused’ approach (Brown 2001), I explore the ways in which objects enable and inhibit visitors’ ability to experience supernatural presences. And by objects, I refer to museum artefacts as well as other features of the museum’s material environment, from the glass cases and the lighting, to the presence of the staff and visitors. But ‘things’ are not the only entities that have a bearing on visitors’ experiences with the divine and supernatural. I therefore also examine how the absence of certain entities, be they objects or activities, affect these encounters. By attending to the absences and presences that constitute museum interactions, this project proposes a way to explore the entities that constitute an encounter with a divine or supernatural presence or, when such an engagement is not possible, the elements that inhibit this process.

This study considers the existence of supernatural presences as real components within the social, embodied and material experiences of the museum visit. It does this, not through evoking some form of theism or animism, but by reconceptualising the components that constitute interactions within museums and the way they assemble and relate to one another. This research proposes and applies an approach that decentres the visitor. Thus, the visitor is neither peripheral nor central, but one of many components within a process of engagement. Decentring the visitor was achieved through using a network approach, which challenges the status quo in museum visitor studies by proposing that all entities within the museum, whether they are human, objects, concepts or divine or supernatural beings, have the potential to act and be acted upon. The majority of studies that look into the agency of objects, by their very nature, are examinations in to the distribution of agency amongst things and people. Some of this research identifies these human-thing entanglements as hybrids (e.g. Stolow 2007 and Droogan 2012). Yet, what is critical to note is that within these (hybridised) interactions are complex power relationships. In many scenarios, the actors are not of equivalent stature nor do their entanglements, in the moment of collaborative action, make the actors equal. Every action muddles the human and the non-human. There is asymmetry; resistance and attraction; movement and immobility. Thus, this study also attends to the ways in which particular actors are able to exert their power over others, and why some assemblages are more stable at enabling or resisting certain engagements than others.

## Battling and blurring boundaries

Religious objects are predominately exhibited in Western museums as evidence of past worship, as works of art or as objects illustrating a narrative.<sup>4</sup> These 'secular interpretations' of religious objects are considered and accepted as the norm and, as a result, acts of devotion (like those described) are often deemed as anomalies. However, in most museums (and research of their visitors), religious practices, interpretations and beliefs are either not noticed or interpreted as something else. The overlooking of such responses has led many scholars to dismiss the presence of religious activities in museums. For example, Alain De Botton (2012: 210) in *Religion for Atheists* exclaims that the "modern museum is no place for visitors to get on their knees before once-sacred objects, weep and beg for reassurance and guidance". Describing museums (in many countries) as "secular environments in which religious art could (in contravention of the wishes of its makers) be seen stripped of its theological context", the philosopher criticises the museum for failing to relate their collections to the "inner needs" of visitors. Philip Fisher (1997: 11) also rejects the notion that visitors genuflect before museum objects, exclaiming that:

It would be an act of madness to enter a museum, and kneel down before a painting of the Virgin to pray for a soldier missing in battle, lighting a candle and leaving an offering on the floor near the picture.

However, in contrast to De Botton who saw museum objects as "stripped" of their religious function, Fisher recognises that the objects can exist within (and move between) multiple systems of practice. According to Fisher, museums do not deprive objects of their religious context. Rather, museums attempt to restrict and permit (and therefore authorise) particular types of practice. Although Fisher recognises that museum objects can continue to act as 'sacred' objects, he dismisses the possibility that they may invite embodied responses that may contravene the (assumed) social norms of the museum space. The perception that visitors' encounters with sacred objects are cognitive (and disembodied) experiences again accepts and perpetuates the view that visitors do not perform physical religious acts within the museum. Such assumptions may also fail to acknowledge the ways non-human entities, such as objects and divine or supernatural beings, can evoke certain responses in visitors.

Despite the lack of attention given to religious acts in museums, some institutions have taken measures to discourage or even outlaw religious practices in their galleries.<sup>5</sup> Others (intentionally or unintentionally) interpret such engagements as irrational and potentially

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<sup>4</sup> For museums located in places of worship or that work closely with local religious communities, these boundaries may be less apparent and contested.

<sup>5</sup> For example, attempts were made in Turkey to ban (and later restrict) the performance of religious services in museum buildings that were formerly Armenian Churches (Hürriyet Daily News 2010).

damaging (as was the case in Indianapolis). The discomfort and confusion surrounding religious practices in museums, in terms of how to interpret and manage these responses, is indicative of the common assumption that museums are secular. This perception has led many museums to embrace their 'secularity' and take it as their duty to provide desecralised experiences of religious objects. When objects are described as historicised or aestheticised a process of secularisation is often implied. Such views may also influence visitors' experiences with the objects. Yet what cannot be underestimated is the pivotal role habituated religious practices outside of the museum shape encounters within the museum. If someone experiences the presence of a divine being via an object in a temple, then why not in a museum? The religious/secular and sacred/profane divisions may exist in academia, but not every visitor will perceive and experience these boundaries in the same way.

The normative binary between the secular and the religious have in many ways come to define modern-day Western museums. Museums are frequently referred to as 'secular churches', 'secular temples' and secular 'cathedrals' (Merriam-Webster 1984: 72, Baxandall 1991: 33, Danto 2001: 132, Orosz 2002: 48, Jardine 2007 and Herwitz 2012: 13). Many visitors, museum staff and scholars echo this opinion such that the comparison is often regarded as axiomatic. However, to say that a museum is a secular cathedral or temple only serves to undermine the presence of religious practices in museums. Moreover, prefacing 'church' or 'temple' with the term 'secular' implies the museum facilitates *religious-like* rituals, but excludes divine and supernatural entities. Consequently, museums are often viewed as places to revere art, knowledge and history. Few studies, therefore, recognise the coexistence of both secular and religious practices. This is partly because educational and informal learning studies have dominated the field of museum visitor research for over three decades. This has left little room, and very few opportunities, to attend to the ways in which museum objects may exert forms of 'sacred' agency. Even fewer studies have considered the ways in which material and immaterial 'actors' within the museum environment intersect within visitors' religious lives. The result is a continuing erasure and dismissal of religious practices within the museum.

## **The network approach**

The heterogeneous nature of museum visits requires a holistic approach to bring the disparate elements of the museum visiting experience together while maintaining the autonomy of the individual components. To achieve this, this study adopted Actor Network Theory (ANT) as a theoretical and methodological framework. This approach explores interactions between multiple 'actors' (which include humans and things) in order to understand the complexities of lived experiences. Employing the principles of ANT and calling on the work of Bruno Latour and John Law, this project maps the networks of actors that constitute religious or supernatural encounters in museums. Latour (2005) views all actors within actor-networks as mediators that undergo transformations, which (as a result) produce more connections and

actor-hybrids.<sup>6</sup> Through a process of mapping the connections between actors, this research assesses whether factors such as the museums' environment, collections, staff, visitors, ethos, history, and exhibition programmes have an effect on the ways in which visitors and objects encounter one another in relation to religious experiences. This approach also brings to light the impact of often ignored and taken-for-granted actors, from the role of benches and lighting to the acoustics of the gallery space. ANT states that the presence and absence of particular elements can prevent or allow some experiences from occurring. This project, therefore, employs the ANT approach to describe how encounters with divine and supernatural entities are made possible through a network of multiple mediators, as well as what actors can inhibit these experiences.

Recognising the agency of non-human entities necessitates moving away from the 'purified' concepts of agency that are dependent on human traits such as intentionality and personal efficacy. By contrast, Actor Network Theory perceives agency as emergent properties that arise when connections are formed between actors. The theory, therefore, offers a way to describe how different immaterial and material and human and non-human entities (such as humans, things, spaces, texts, or concepts) impact upon one another. Through employing the language of ANT, I define the term 'sacred' to describe a specific type of interaction in which particular actors come together within an assemblage. This usually involves the devotee, a material 'thing' or 'things', a divine or supernatural being and a physical place in space and time for this encounter to occur. In the context of the museum, the visitor's memories, emotions, beliefs, past practices and communities (human and non-human) intersect with the object. This understanding avoids perceiving the 'sacred' as an inherent property of an object or as a construction of the devotee. This research also resists defining the sacred against the profane or using the term as a category to identify particular objects or spaces. Rather, the term 'sacred' describes forms of engagement that can potentially arise anywhere, including within a museum. Barbara Mills and TJ Ferguson (2008: 356) state that ritual practices not only depend on what actors are present in the physical locale of the interaction, but are also informed by past private and public associations "about what is appropriate in each context in order to ensure the efficacy of the performance". And rituals, like all practices, are not impervious to change. Rather, each performance provides "intended and unintended opportunities for modification". The museum environment presents networks that often require visitors to adjust the ways they physically, intellectually, emotionally and devotionally interact with the objects. And so, by understanding agency as distributed across networks of human and non-human 'actors', this research provides a new insight into the ways museum

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<sup>6</sup> Bruno Latour's understanding of actor networks has evolved over the past 20 years, often in response to his critics (including himself) and in light of the ways ANT has been applied across a vast array of fields.

visitor experiences are shaped by many more forces than simply the intentions, motivations and actions of the museum staff and visitors.

The most prominent studies and texts that explore the relationship between religion and museums are, in the most part, purely theoretical (e.g. Duncan 1995), based on anecdotal evidence (e.g. Paine 2000) or entirely empirical with little or no engagement with theoretical debates (e.g. visitor evaluation reports and reviews). Elkins (2004) has written a study of religious experiences amongst visitors to art galleries. This is problematic, however, for methodological reasons, with Elkins' analysis based, in the most part, on academics and curators' written accounts of their own strong emotional experiences in galleries together with other anecdotal evidence.<sup>7</sup> Elkins' understanding of religious experience in terms of strong emotional identification with a piece of high art – exemplified by the visitor caught in an experience of awe whilst looking at one of Mark Rothko's abstract expressionist paintings – is insufficiently self-critical, restricting the religious gaze to a form approved of within liberal Protestantism (see Orsi, 2005). This study seeks to develop a more complex account of the nature of engagements between devotees and divine figures within the space of the museum than this limited notion of intense, emotional absorption.

This research also differs to existing studies by bringing together a theoretical framework rarely used within visitor studies and substantial empirical research. This use of ANT also addresses a number of relatively under-researched areas; namely, the role of mundane material objects in experiences with the divine and the mediated nature of religious interactions in non-devotional spaces. While scholars, such as McDannell (1995) and Orsi (2005), draw our attention to the role of mundane objects in religious experiences, the locations of these interactions are predominately religious. Yet museums are not distinctly religious spaces. Visitors who experience some form of religious engagement with an exhibit do so in a way that is unique to the museum environment, and this study is one of the first to examine the nature of materially-mediated religious experiences in this context.

## Outline of thesis

This thesis begins with a review of the theory, literature and history relating to the study of religion, museums and museum visitors within a British context. The chapter starts with an examination of the influential role of the 'Enlightenment' and the Protestant Reformation and its impact on how we conceive materiality. Employing Bruno Latour's (1993a) process of

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<sup>7</sup> For his book *Pictures and Tears*, Elkins (2004: vii) asked his colleagues and people who he knew "cared for art" for stories about crying in front of paintings. He also posted inquiries in newspapers and journals (namely the Dutch financial daily newspaper *Het Financiële Dagblad* and the *New York Review of Books*).

'purification', I investigate how the attempted disenchantment and dematerialisation of the social and natural world denied objects of agency and redefined how people engaged with objects. More specifically, these processes have contributed to the 'writing out' of religion within museums and within museum visitor studies. The latter half of this chapter, therefore, focuses on visitor studies within academia and as evaluation procedures within museums. As visitor studies often demonstrate the priorities of the museum, they have continued to overlook the role of objects and divine and supernatural beings. Paying particular attention to evaluation findings and models, I situate this exploration of visitor studies in a broader discussion of the museum's role in constructing audiences.

The third chapter introduces the interdisciplinary study of material religion as a source of new approaches and perspectives to consider religion and materiality. Here I explore how the study of material religion is readdressing the ways in which materiality, embodied practices and belief are addressed and interpreted. Critically reviewing the works of key contributors to material religion studies, I consider the sub-field's appropriateness for examining interactions in museums. Material religion studies also offer ways to analyse immaterial entities such as divine and supernatural actors, who are virtually absent within the current museum visitor research literature. The chapter then presents Actor Network Theory (ANT) as an alternative approach to understanding the way objects, people and supernatural entities interrelate. ANT explains agency as an effect of networks of humans and non-humans coming together. This understanding of agency is founded on the principle of general symmetry between humans and non-humans. I propose that perceiving agency in this way is necessary in order to address the material, embodied and religious dimensions of visitors' interactions with divine and supernatural beings. In doing this, I critically examine ANT's concepts which perceive engagements as inherently collaborative. I then consider the actor network as a framework for exploring visitors' engagements with religious objects. By the end of these chapters, I will have argued how the secular perception of museums has concealed the presence of visitors' religious practices, clarified this project's central research questions, and set out the theoretical approaches that recognise the mediation of religion and the agency of non-humans.

The fourth chapter describes and provides a rationale for the research methodology used in this project. Here I explain how I drew on ANT to construct a methodology to map the networks of interaction observed in the museum. This section also identifies and examines the qualitative methods for data collection, which included interviews and observation. I then outline the procedures and processes used to collate, select and analyse this data. Using ethnographic research methods within an ANT framework, I explain the process of mapping relations between actors to provide a comprehensive examination of how connections are produced and performed.

The second part of this thesis presents the findings from the empirical research conducted at the British Museum between 2010 and 2013, which derives from over 200 interviews with visitors and staff and multiple hours of observation. These chapters focus on two temporary exhibitions and the archaeological tours that centre on the Old Testament. Through the course of the fieldwork and analyses, particular actors arose as playing significant roles within the success and failure of divine/supernatural engagements. The findings focus on these actors as a way to explore how these entities were able to facilitate and, therefore, mediate a sacred connection for some visitors, but not for others.

The fieldwork chapters begin with an examination of visitors' experiences at the temporary exhibition *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (23 June – 9 October 2011). Due to the exhibition's exploration and display of Christian relics and reliquaries, this chapter centres on the ways in which relic veneration was made possible (and problematic) in the museum setting. As the section makes clear, visitors' past experiences and knowledge had a profound influence on whether they desired and were able to venerate the objects. However, the exhibition's material environment (including the presence of other visitors) posed an assortment of challenges and opportunities for those who ordinarily practise veneration. These experiences often involved the visitors' embodied and material engagements within the exhibition space as well as their beliefs. The chapter goes on to argue that the actors within the exhibition that had the potential to threaten and prevent such devotional acts were often the same entities that were said to help and facilitate a sacred connection. This chapter, therefore, focuses in on the paradoxical nature of such actors and the museum's ambivalent position on the existence of devotional activities.

The sixth chapter looks at the temporary exhibition, *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* (26 January – 15 April 2012). Here the findings explore the experiences of the Muslim and non-Muslim visitors in terms of how they engaged with the space and objects. In contrast to *Treasures of Heaven*, which displayed objects that are believed to materially mediate holy figures, the divine experience was instead mediated by visitors' memories (or imaginings) of the pilgrimage. The divine experience was, therefore, spatially remote from the museum and, yet, still connected. The exhibits at *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* thereby pointed to the sacred sites where intense experiences of God and the Prophets are understood to take place. The subordinate role of objects within (most sects of) Islam, also meant that embodied and material religious practices within the exhibition were virtually non-existent. However, it was (in the most part) distance (in the Euclidian and spiritual sense) that kept devotees from experiencing a sacred presence, as opposed to the physical properties of the exhibition. The exhibition's ability to evoke these memories and desires to perform Hajj, for some visitors, raised the question whether the museum visit could or should be viewed as religious.

The seventh chapter describes the so-called 'Bible tours' that take place at the British Museum's permanent galleries. The majority of these tours visit archaeological artefacts that

relate to places, people, periods or specific events mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. Some are conducted by representatives from places of worship (such as members of the clergy or Rabbis), but most of the groups are led by trained guides from Jehovah's Witness tour operators. For the tour members and guides, it was not the displayed artefacts that mediated a divine presence but the Word of God, which was made present on the tours as personal Bibles, as (voiced) recitations and as private readings. Whilst the Bible (or Tanach within Judaism) was the tours' focal point, the texts' agency and authority were frequently supported, disputed and contradicted by other elements within the museum. The tours provided a very different social, spatial and material network to the aforementioned exhibitions. The tours, therefore, demonstrated that the gallery space cannot determine whether it becomes a site of religious experience as groups can assemble the tools, artefacts and texts to create a tour that centres on the divine.

In the conclusion, this thesis summarises the argument that the privileging of the visitor, the perception of museums as secular and the lack of research into material religious practices in spaces which are not intended to be devotional has (for decades) obscured and hidden the existence of divine and supernatural experiences in museums. Through addressing these significant oversights within museum visitor studies and adopting a framework that makes visible what is often overlooked, this thesis draws attention to the entities which constitute 'sacred encounters'. By understanding visitor-object engagements to be networks of human and non-human actors, this study examines how such connections incorporating the divine or supernatural are formed, maintained and broken. Central to these interactions is their sacred quality, which is evoked through encounters between people, places, objects and the divine and the supernatural. This study, therefore, challenges many concepts and boundaries in order to form a new way of seeing and understanding these complex and often contradictory engagements. The conclusion also draws attention to the contradictory nature of visitors' 'sacred engagements'. On the one hand, visitor-object engagements involve elements of uncertainty (as the visitors' response to the objects cannot be anticipated). Yet, on the other hand, there are elements of continuity, as some objects and visitors are already enmeshed within networks of devotional practice. This intermingling of certainty and uncertainty is the essence of many, if not all, museum visits. Finally, the findings demonstrate how the persistent perception that museums are secular continues to shape visitor engagements. However, this research also highlights the resilience of particular networks in maintaining sacred connections despite their presence in what some may conceive a secular space.

part one:  
HISTORY, THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

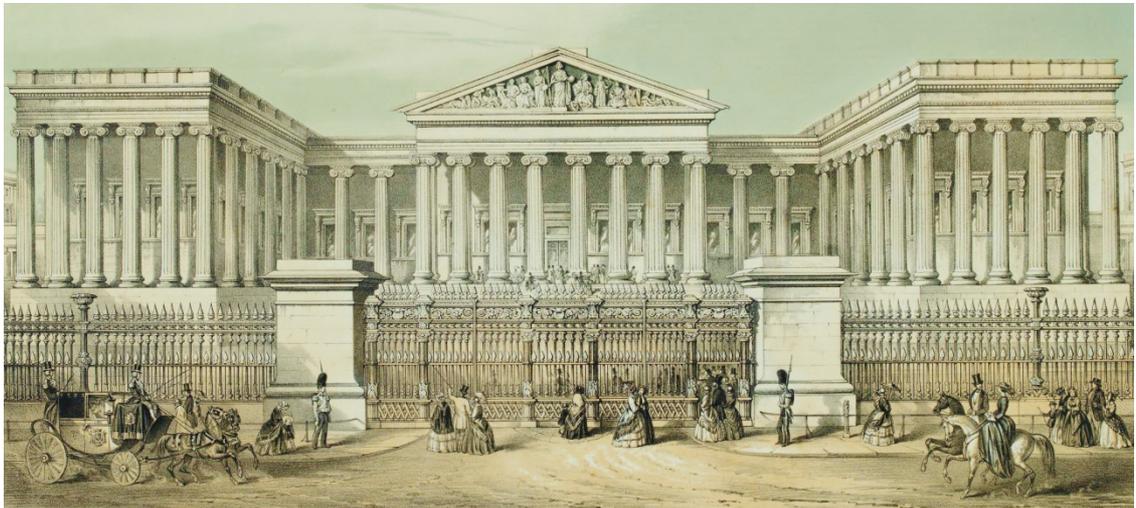


Figure 1: The British Museum (Butler 1853)

## chapter two:

# MUSEUMS, VISITORS AND RELIGION

To begin, it is necessary to establish the historical context in which museums in Britain (and specifically the British Museum) arose. The first public museums were consciously founded as Enlightenment projects and were taken to represent 'Enlightened' aims, ideas and taxonomies (Sloan 2003). Later assumptions about the nonreligious nature of the Enlightenment led to the perception that museums began as secular institutions and have continued to demonstrate and embody secular values. For example, Carol Duncan (1995: 8) in her writings on rituals in art galleries, argues that since the Enlightenment the museum has been viewed "in the secular/religious terms of our culture, [where the words] 'ritual' and 'museums' are antithetical" and where "public collections can signify only secular values, not religious beliefs". Duncan describes this common perception which depicts the secularisation of museums, as a supposed shift from religious to nonreligious. However, the simplistic and linear trajectory of museums from religious to secular is a myth (1995: 8). The influence of religion on how museums display and interpret objects did not stop with the onset of the Enlightenment age, as is often believed, because the Enlightenment in Britain was never an anti-religious movement. In fact, Protestantism laid the foundations for the Age of Enlightenment, playing a key role in the "rationalist cultural revolution" (Woodhead 2009: 193).

Before discussing the epoch's relationship with religion further, I wish to stress that definitions of the Enlightenment are often highly contested and variable.<sup>8</sup> Historians such as JGA Pocock (2005: 9) argue that 'The Enlightenment' was not a unified phenomenon "with a single history and definition" but a "family of Enlightenments, displaying both family resemblances and family quarrels". By contrast Jonathan Israel (2001: v) warns that the plurality perspective of the intellectual movement ultimately distorts the "common impulses and concerns" that shaped the phenomenon. Hence, Israel describes the European Enlightenment as a "single

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<sup>8</sup> My argument is concerned here with how concepts of the Enlightenment, particularly in relation to Enlightenment assumptions about religion, shape the ways in which museums have been understood in relation to religious/secular binaries. Historical arguments about the periodization or nature of the 'Age of Enlightenment' are then of less primary significance to this thesis than the ways in which notions of Enlightenment shape the ways in which museums are understood by museum practitioners and academics.

highly integrated intellectual and cultural movement" with multiple sources. Peter Gay (1966: x), like Pocock, also uses the 'family' metaphor, but ultimately defines the Enlightenment as one coalition of "intellectuals united by a single style of thinking" albeit "loose, informal, [and] wholly unorganised" (1966: 3). Whether perceived as singular or plural, the Enlightenment was undeniably a cluster of interrelated movements (Beales 2005) that defined new expressions of "moral values, new canons of taste, styles of sociability and views of human nature" (Porter 2001: 14).

When the Enlightenment took place is equally contended. As discussed by Charles Withers (2008), timeframes range from the 18th century to a much broader period that beginning in the late seventeenth century. These much disputed dates are complicated by the multiple and varied philosophical and practical processes taking place across Northern Europe. For the purpose of this work, I take a fairly broad timeframe and identify the Age of Enlightenment to roughly indicate the period from the Restoration of the British Monarchy in 1660 up until the Great Reform Act of 1832 (Sloan 2003). However, many ideas that shaped the Enlightenment were set in motion during the Renaissance and the Reformation (Clark 2014), when – as most scholars agree – religion had a vital role.

Stressing the central role religion played, Stewart Brown (2008) refers to this era as the 'Christian Enlightenment' suggesting that, while the authority of the Christian Church weakened, faith in God was maintained. For instance, the Church's role in public affairs for the first national museum in the UK was far from peripheral. Testament to the enduring influence of religion in public life was the Archbishop of Canterbury's presence on the board of Principal Trustees of the British Museum (from the institution's establishment in 1753 to 1963).<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the British Museum's founder, Sir Hans Sloane, saw his collection as a manifestation of God's work, which, again, demonstrates the crucial role religion played within 'Enlightened' museums. Despite the fact that the Enlightenment embodied both Protestant theology and rational logic, the period has become seen as secular. As a result, museums (from and following this period) are often viewed as institutions that are free of religious influence. It is therefore a modern perspective of a secular Enlightenment that has come to define the modern museum. In *Genealogies of Religion*, Talal Asad (2003) notes that whilst the epoch associated with the Enlightenment continues to be viewed as a time of 'rational investigation', it was also a time when the myths of early modern Europe (particularly of Ancient Greece and Rome) were revered. Thus, the paintings and sculptures depicting gods, goddesses and monsters, and their associated myths, became part of upper-class culture and education (Asad 2003). As such, they (re-)entered public consciousness through the secular guise of museums, art galleries and universities. The idealised sensibilities of early modern

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<sup>9</sup> The Principal Trustees comprised of the three great offices of the State: the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Lord Chancellor, and the Speaker of the House of Commons (Wilson 2002).

Europe also provided a legitimate means to feel moved by art (in what was thought to be) a nonreligious manner as the deities of the Ancient Civilisations were perceived as far removed from contemporary religion (Asad 2003).

In order to address the relationship between museums and religion, this chapter consists of two parts. The first section will propose that shifts in understandings around religious practices and materials, in the centuries preceding and following the first public museums, subsequently shaped how museums and their collections were (and are) perceived. Central to this is the Enlightenment that, as stated, played a defining role in the conception of the modern museum. However, contrary to popular opinion, the Enlightenment was inextricably framed by Protestant beliefs, which privileged a particular kind of relationship to the divine, to knowledge and to objects. The second part of this chapter focuses on museum visitors, and more specifically, how visitors are evaluated and studied within museums and academia. Here, I address the lack of research around visitors' religious activities as a result of modern audit procedures, funding pressures and the aforementioned 'Enlightened' ambitions. In doing so, I detail how particular models, classifications and interpretations of museum visitors fail to account for the ways religious beliefs and practices influence visitors' interactions with museum objects and spaces. By thinking about the study of museum visitors both in terms of this longer historical perspective, and more recent assumptions in museum visitor studies, this chapter will demonstrate how the study of religious forms of engagement within museums has been occluded.

## The Enlightenment

The Age of Enlightenment is often viewed as a period of intense pursuits for knowledge, the outcome of which was believed to be the key to human emancipation and autonomy. Max Weber (2004: 171) dubbed the Enlightenment "the disenchantment of the world", whilst Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002) saw it as the dispelling of myths and fantasy.<sup>10</sup> Yet the 'disenchantment' of the world – and specifically of materiality – was more an ambition than a unified and realised project. The Enlightenment was, instead, an amalgamation of many intellectual movements. Collectively these endeavours had a profound impact on how prominent thinkers, including scholars and religious leaders, presented and communicated new ideas about the material and non-material world. Moreover, these shifts in perceiving the world, aimed to set the Age of Enlightenment apart from the medieval period of wonder and idol worship (Porter 2000). A key factor in this change was the Protestant Reformation. Founded in opposition to Roman Catholic traditions, which many reformers deemed as at odds with the teachings of the Bible, the Protestant Reformation rejected the religious orders

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<sup>10</sup> Moreover, Weber (1968: 298) saw this process of demystification as progress whereby there were no longer "mysterious, incalculable forces" at work as all aspects of life could be mastered through rational "calculation".

and such practices as venerating icons and relics. The Reformation signalled a new way of conceiving and practising religion where “[s]eeing was still believing, but a way of believing evangelical truth rather than popish error” (Collinson 1994: 89). The Reformation, however, was not met with submissive acceptance.<sup>11</sup> Amongst the Protestant denominations there were disagreements on key issues from transcendence to transubstantiation. Reform was also unsuccessful in some countries and met with periods and pockets of resistance and adaptation in others.<sup>12</sup> Even within the more stable Reformed countries, communities continued practising rituals, rejected by Protestantism, as part of their everyday religious lives. The centuries following the Reformation are often viewed as the period in which the physical environment began to replace the Bible as a primary source of information and investigation (Koch 2005). Yet, during the Renaissance and Enlightenment epochs, religious beliefs continued to play a crucial role in shaping ideas about the natural world.

Throughout the Age of Enlightenment, ‘Enlightened thinkers’ sought to create a system of abstract ideas and theories to better understand and order the universe. The vision of the encyclopaedic museum is testament to these aspirations of order and classification, as was the opinion that the public museum was a place to educate and inform. However, the process of classifying and cataloguing, and therefore making the collection accessible to others, was far from straightforward (Findlen 1994). By the mid-19th century, new methods for organising and ordering the collection were developing and, as a consequence, many of these decisions were frequently debated. For example, in a Commissioners’ meeting in 1849 at the British Museum (British Museum), the commissioners deliberated over a pamphlet entitled *A Concise and True Account of the Modern Cannibals’ Religion* (1850: 381). “Where would you place that?” asked commissioner John Payne Collier, ‘Under the word Religion’, or under the word ‘Cannibals?’”. To Viscount Canning’s astonishment, Collier admitted to paying particular attention to the word ‘account’. “I should certainly think that ‘Account’ was the last word that ought to be taken in that entry”, deplored Canning. As this example illustrates, establishing a coherent order within museums was both new and contested ground. The creation of categories formed a system to conceptualise and classify ideas and material things. This process of making knowledge retrievable and visible would inevitably lead to certain ‘things’ and concepts being sidelined and mis- or re-interpreted in order to fit within the newly

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<sup>11</sup> The Protestant Reformation was challenged by the Catholic Church at regional, diocesan and institutional levels. The most influential challenge was led by the Council of Trent (1545-1563) which questioned the motives and piety of Protestant beliefs, while reaffirming and adapting Catholic practices.

<sup>12</sup> In the face of Protestant attacks, the Council of Trent reformed some practices, while protecting and officially defining others. For example, a decree in 1563 ordered Bishops to teach the laity that icons do not hold any inherent divinity or virtue and so trust should not “be reposed in images, as was of old done by the Gentiles who placed their hope in idols” (Berington 1846: 322).

devised systems. Thus, the presentation of the collections, whether in a catalogue or displayed within a case, came to reflect and resonate the ideals and values of the Enlightenment.

To understand how the museum experience came to be thought of as secular, one must also consider the curatorial practices and museum visitor experiences during the Enlightenment period. According to Paula Findlen (1994: 399), 18<sup>th</sup> century collectors “became more attentive to the written descriptions that accompanied objects in a museum (undoubtedly in reaction to the more emblematic portrayal of objects that characterized earlier collections)”. Tony Bennett (1998: 352) also endorses this shift in the ways visitors perceived objects. Identifying the Enlightenment as ocularcentric, Bennett suggests that museums’ penchant for print aimed to convert “ignorant listeners and gullible onlookers” into “silent and solitary readers”. This, says Bennett, was a Protestant mode of engaging.<sup>13</sup> However, that is not to say that visitors read everything and never looked at the objects themselves. Labels were often sparse and frequently absent in the early years of the British Museum and so the museums Bennett describes are more representative of the museum curators’ hopes than the actual conduct of the public. In the same way that some Protestants continued to practice Catholic-like rituals, many visitors would continue to respond to the objects. However, museums were promoting a more abstract mode of engagement that conceived objects as illustrative of ideas and knowledge. This form of engagement was not only about reading the guidebooks and labels (if provided), but inferring meaning from the ways objects were grouped and displayed. The role of objects in authenticating historical events was also central to the Protestant and rationalist modes of engaging.<sup>14</sup> These approaches to museum collections prioritised the objects’ immaterial qualities over their material functions, which, again, reflected the Protestant-rational frameworks of knowledge during that period.

## Materiality and purification

Taxonomies and concepts were the bricks and mortar of knowledge during the Enlightenment. Such divisions and groupings of ideas and matter, argues Bruno Latour (1993a), were all part of a process called *purification*. In an interview he explains the premise:

Science has always been linked to the other cultures of the Western World, although it has always described itself as apart — separated from politics, values, religion... But when you begin to work on a history of Science... you find on the contrary, that things have

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<sup>13</sup> For Protestants, Webb Keane (2003: 422) explains: “verbal prayers are merely the outward expression of sincere inner thoughts that are, in essence, wholly immaterial, like the soul who intends them”. Language is therefore arbitrary, dematerialized and “merely symbolic”.

<sup>14</sup> For some Christian visitors, archaeological findings from places mentioned in the Bible verified the authenticity of the scriptures and, thus, confirmed God’s word.

never been severed, that there has always been a continuous re-connection (in Naravane 2011).

According to Latour, this *purification* aims to separate the two distinct ontological zones that are non-humans (nature) and humans (culture). Yet a total separation is impossible and so the work of purification creates hybrids; mixtures of nature and culture. Purification is thus a process by which dichotomies are created alongside new unexpected fusions. Latour argues that it is this illusion of the separation of humans from non-humans that defines the modern individual. In this process of purification material forms are located within nature, and therefore separated from humans. Igor Kopytoff (1986: 84) notes that the separation of people from objects did not end with the Enlightenment, but continues, becoming “culturally axiomatic in the West by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century”. Yet, as will be illustrated, by evaluating the process of purification during the Enlightenment, many paradoxes and incompatibilities come to light. The purification processes of modernity also worked to rid “[n]ature of any divine presence [and thereby]... ridding Society of any divine origin” (Latour 1993a: 33). Latour argues that the Reformation along with the rise of ‘scientific facts’ in the 17<sup>th</sup> century reinvented spirituality, which pushed God out of public affairs and into the private minds and hearts of the individual. Moreover, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, purification sought to:

distinguish the truly scientific component of the other sciences from the component attributable to ideology... [by] carefully separating the part that belonged to things themselves and the part that could be attributed to the functioning of the economy, the unconscious, language, or symbols (Latour 1993a: 35).

Purification, therefore, worked to deprive material forms and the divine of their powers to influence and affect people, processes and ideas.

The prioritising of the ideas and information that objects represented over their material properties typified how museum artefacts were perceived. Purification rendered the objects abstract and (seemingly) powerless. Crucial, in this Protestant-led mission to demystify material *things*, was the interpretation (and their corresponding interpretative frameworks) of objects. In his writings on Calvinist missionaries, Webb Keane (2007) suggests that the Reformation’s attacks on material forms were not an example of purification, but the source of it. The Protestant Reformation, Keane (2007: 54) poses, sought to restore agency to the ‘correct agents’:

One of the chief aims of the work of purification, as undertaken by Protestant missionaries, is to establish the proper locus of agency in the world by sorting out correct from mistaken imputations of agency. God, Christ, and humans, for instance, have agency in their respective ways— priestly words, pagan sacrifices, and ancestral spirits do not.

According to Keane, this process exposed the real and rightful source of agency as human. Central to this was the dematerialisation of religion and the individual in secular terms. Thus, as well as drawing a line between nature and culture, the relationship between people and religion was also inscribed. However, this division is far less clear. Roy Porter (2000: 228), a prolific writer on the Enlightenment, argues that Enlightened thinkers rationalised life “in terms of a model of natural order which replaced an active God with an active man”. As the agency and autonomy of humans increased, the agency of God in everyday life diminished.<sup>15</sup> According to Talal Asad (1993: 205), this shift involved a “forcible redefinition of religion as belief”, which transformed religious practice into a personal and private affair.<sup>16</sup> Redefining religion as belief was a crucial step in the discrediting of non-human agency in religious practices. For many people, within Protestant Britain, devotional engagements with God constituted immaterial and direct interactions with a transcendent God.

Webb Keane argues that Protestants (specifically, Calvinists) sought freedom not only from deities but also from material forms. Keane (2007: 247) found that “things”, in the minds of Dutch missionaries in Indonesia, “imposed unwarranted limits to human freedom”. Whilst the missionaries deemed the Indonesians fetishists, it was in fact the missionaries that were fixated with the power of the non-human forms. In *Iconoclash*, Latour (2002: 14) considers the position of the outsider who tries to destroy what is idolised only to produce “greater flows of media, more powerful ideas, stronger idols”. Attempts to purify the world of material forms ultimately produced more hybrids. Such hybrids were evident in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, from the enduring character of ghost sightings (Porter 2000) to the continuing use of ‘superstitious’ charms and amulets within Christian households.

The efforts during the Age of Enlightenment to deny material forms of agency meant denying them their materiality. The expectation to understand the ideas the exhibits represented, which were often presented through purposefully arranged assemblages, led visitors to engage with what the objects meant rather than what they could do. In Bill Brown’s (2001) *Thing Theory* he proposes that we look *through* objects’ material properties, as we look through a window, in order to see “what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture”. According to Fisher (2004: 462), the placement of religious objects and art in museums led to a perception that “formerly charismatic [objects] are subjected to classification and a rational approach that, in effect, bureaucratizes them”. In the museum, objects were often perceived as windows to grander ideas and narratives. Consequently, the individual material properties of the objects (as present or potential components within interactions) were rendered far less significant.

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<sup>15</sup> This idea led Nietzsche (1974) to state that ‘God is dead’.

<sup>16</sup> Latour (1993a) describes God as another form of separation and purification, whereby the divine can be absent in public affairs while present in personal moments. He therefore calls God ‘crossed out’ as He is both present and absent.

## The separation and mixing of museums and religion

The perception that museums are secular, and sit in contrast to places of devotion and religious veneration, is refuted by a statement made in the will of Sir Hans Sloane, the founding collector of the British Museum. In the will, Sloane (1753) described himself as “a great observer and admirer of the wonderful power, wisdom and contrivance of the Almighty God”. It also stated that his collection, as well as being for “the use and improvement of physic, and other arts and sciences, and benefit of mankind”, was a “manifestation of the glory of God”. In Sloane’s opinion, the accumulation and study of artefacts and natural specimens was not in conflict with a faith in God, but verification of His work. Aware of increasing secular interpretations within the sciences, Sloane also declared that his collection was a “confutation of atheism and its consequences.” And so, at the core of the British Museum – in its founding collection – is a combined expression of Sloane’s religious and rational beliefs. Despite the centrality of God in Sloane’s will, the committee set up to run the British Museum rarely referred to the divine so explicitly, preferring instead to focus on the collection as human endeavours and examples of progress.

Considering the expression ‘the glory of God’ (as cited in Sloane’s will) Charles Taylor (1989: 447) asserts that as “the presence of God no longer lies in the sacred, because this category fades in a disenchanted world... [God] can be thought to be no less powerfully present through His Design”. In comparison to medieval Christianity, God played a lesser role in the everyday decisions of Enlightened people’s lives and yet remained a fundamental part of life, as the creator and source of all things. This understanding of the divine was a central concept of Natural Religion and of Deism, with the latter becoming most prominent in Britain during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>17</sup> Whilst not known as a Deist, Sloane’s will evoked many Deist ideas. These shared ideologies, popular amongst philosophers and scientists, believed that God created the world, set the natural order and then left it to its own devices. Although often depicted as the route to atheism, Deism was centred on a belief in God that saw order in nature and the desire for order as evidence of God’s creation of the cosmos. The key to Deism, suggested Taylor (1989), was the idea that God relates to humans as rational and autonomous beings. In this respect, there was neither opposition nor division between religious beliefs and rational logic.

The question whether religion and museums were with or against each other led to new ways of articulating how museums served or hindered one’s commitment to God. This was debated in Parliament for over 60 years, starting from the 1830s, in regard to the opening of museums

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<sup>17</sup> Deism rejected prophecies and miracles within Christianity and questioned the biblical texts. Like Protestant forms of Christianity, Deists saw their beliefs to be the original and legitimate form of Christianity, as opposed to the corrupted practices which only sought to benefit the clergy.

on Sundays – the Christian Sabbath.<sup>18</sup> Whereas those against Sunday openings labelled the museum as a distraction that would turn people away from God, those in favour described museum visiting as means of admiring God’s work as a creator. As the Anglo-Irish politician William H. Gregory argued:

the opening of scientific and artistic institutions, so far from placing the intellect at war with religion, would be the means of exciting thought and reverence among vast masses of men who never thought nor revered (Hansard, 4 June 1869, col. 1262).

This MP and others considered museums to be (potentially) part of religious life. Yet it should be noted that promoting the museum’s religious alliance, within these debates, was as much politically and economically motivated as it was religiously. The discussions mostly turned to the social inequalities between the classes and the inaccessibility of museums during the working week.<sup>19</sup> The subject of religion was, therefore, employed strategically to defend arguments for and against Sunday openings.

### Denying agency

The purification of religious agency was present in the British Museum in a number of ways during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It even influenced how certain objects were displayed. For example, in order to distance the contemporary Protestant denominations from their Catholic past:

superstitious Christianity of the sort represented by the amulets on display was effectively consigned either to antiquity or to the contemporary Roman Catholic world, and thus rendered as alien to the religion of Protestant Britons as that of any pagan from the ancient world (Sloan 2003: 213).

This blurring of past and present enabled museums to illustrate the anachronistic character of material forms of religious worship. Yet Catholic objects were mostly absent at the British Museum up until the mid-1800s. In the periodical *The Catholic Cabinet* (1843: 79), the writer stated that: “amidst all the Pagan collections of the Louvre, the Christian student will find exquisite specimens... all in the first style of Catholic art, and of every date”. By contrast, at the British Museum, the writer noted, there were no such displays from the Middle Ages. The exclusion of Catholicism at the British Museum also extended to the staff. As reported by the

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<sup>18</sup> The British Museum began opening on Sundays in 1896.

<sup>19</sup> The majority of MPs participating in these debates clearly favoured church attending to museum visiting, yet museum-going was preferable to the working classes spending their Sundays getting drunk; or in the words of William H. Gregory: “Let them picture to themselves the Sunday afternoon of the rich, and the Sunday afternoon of the poor... pleasure, liberty, for the one; listlessness, apathy—in too many cases drunkenness – for the other” (Hansard, 4 June 1869, col. 1267).

House of Commons in 1888, a Roman Catholic appointed to the British Museum resigned after concerns were raised that he might “colour history” (Hansard, 7 November 1888 col. 575).<sup>20</sup> Such events (and absences) indicated a continuing concern around the threat and polluting influence of corporeal forms of engagement with objects.

Despite the anti-Catholic stance on recruitment, interest in collecting and displaying medieval objects grew, culminating in the establishment of the British Museum’s Department of British and Medieval Antiquities in 1866. The new acquisitions prompted discussions amongst the British Museum’s Trustees and between politicians on whether medieval works belonged in the British Museum, an establishment dedicated to history, or at the South Kensington Museum (later to become the V&A) as art objects. In one debate, a politician argued:

If we desired to study art, so as to embrace as far as possible the history of all ages, it was of the utmost importance that we should have the materials for that study laid side by side... To draw such a line [between Christian and pre-Christian cultures] was an injury at once to Christianity and to Paganism...Christian art was built on that of previous ages; and therefore, in order to understand the very fact of Christianity, it was requisite to connect—not separate—the two... (Hansard, 1 August 1867 col. 640).

The MP’s argument illustrates a change in attitude around the country’s medieval and Catholic past. However, the statement also illustrates how visitors were supposed to engage with these medieval works. These objects (which would have included altarpieces, statues of holy figures and reliquaries) were to be displayed as art objects or to construct a history of religion and artistic development. These Christian objects were to be appreciated for their form and skill, and definitely not venerated as sacred conduits. The increased interest in medieval Christianity was also spurred on by the Gothic revival.<sup>21</sup> Yet this period of revived interest in the Gothic (particularly architecture) was also a time of concern within the Protestant sects due to increasing numbers defecting to Tractarianism, High Anglicism and Catholicism. Anxieties about the ways visitors may perceive and interact with devotional objects were still very present.

Attempts to separate religious influences and museums also involved a re-interpretation of terms and practices associated with religion. For example, during a commissioners’ meeting at the British Museum in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, a staff member described his dismay that a piece from the base of a monument was taken off so it could stand on the floor, proclaiming that

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<sup>20</sup> This comment post-dated the Universities Test Act 1871 which gave Catholics the right to participate fully in academic study (Seaman 2002: 203).

<sup>21</sup> During the nineteenth century, a number of British Museum trustees and staff were members of the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture (1839) and the Ecclesiological Society, set up to advise restorers of churches on Gothic architecture (Wilson 2002).

“pieces of antiquity brought here ought to be kept most sacred... and no part of them removed” (Commissioners Appointed to Inquire Into the Constitution and Government of the British Museum 1850). The word ‘sacred’, therefore, took on a secular meaning, which reflected the core aims of the museum: to provide information on past cultures. By mixing religious and mundane uses of the term ‘sacred’ ultimately obscured and undermined the meaning of the term with the practice of religion. The quasi-religious rituals, architecture and interiors of the museum, as described by Duncan (1995), could also be viewed as hybrids that arose out of attempts to separate religion from museums. Writing about art, Alfred Gell (1998: 97) refers to this as an ‘aesthetic attitude’, which derived from a “Protestant-Puritan heritage combined with a special form of art-theoretical casuistry”. This resulted, he explains, in “a form of bad faith about the ‘power of images’ [that] neutralised our idols by reclassifying them as art”. This process rendered the ‘idols’ powerless. By contrast, the Christian God remained a component in people’s lives and yet banished to private devotion. Thus, in the public museum, the divine was substituted and art and knowledge were sacralised. In *The Love of Art*, Bourdieu (1990: 112) describes the museum:

In these sacred places of art... often in the Graeco-Roman style of civic sanctuaries... everything leads to the conclusion that the world of art opposes itself to the world of everyday life just as the sacred does to the profane.

Echoing Durkheim’s (1915) definition of the separated domains of the sacred and profane, Bourdieu evokes an image of the elitist and exclusive museum that is also distanced from people’s lived practices. This distancing was yet another attempt to purify the religious from the secular. Furthermore, Latour (1993a: 33) proposed that modern people could be “atheists even while remaining religious”. This hybrid (or contradiction) was possible because religion, in modernity, was deemed a private affair. Thus, religious practices had no place in visitors’ engagement within a public museum or, at least, this was the idea.

In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour (1993a) argues that the work of modernity is to separate nature from culture. In the context of religion and museums, a similar logic exists. In this process of purification, attempts were made to separate religion and museums. This presented museum engagements as secular practices of rationality and objectivity, which stood in opposition to irrational religious practices. The process involved both discrediting and denying material forms of agency, such as experiencing a spiritual presence through the means of an object. However, as with the purification of nature and culture, the separation was never realised because, as Graham Harman (2009: 58) writes, “the dualism of nature and culture is groundless in the first place... [as] there is nothing... inherently natural or cultural”. In other words, there can be no separation if there is no real division. Similarly, ‘belief’ cannot be distinguished from ‘knowledge’ as they operate in the same way (Latour 1993a). Whilst museums may privilege secular knowledge over religious belief and practices, this division has no basis. The work of modernity to distance and remove religion from ‘secular’ museum

practices obscured the influential role of religious performances and beliefs (at an institutional and visitor-level). In this sense, one could argue that museums have never been entirely secular. Rather, museums are a product of multiple combinations of both religious and nonreligious knowledge, ideas and activities. The sacralisation of objects as representing history and knowledge, rather than because of their inherent materiality and religious significance, concealed the influence and presence of religious activities, ideologies and frameworks within museums, both past and present. These processes have shaped the ways in which people perceive museums and their collections and interact within the spaces. The attempted exclusion and concealment of religion in museums continues to this day in studies and evaluations on museum visitors which, as this chapter will now consider, rarely acknowledge the role of religious practices and beliefs.

### **Studying museum visitors**

The study of museum visitors is a discipline dedicated to how people engage with objects, but rarely has this field attended to visitors' religious practices. Such omissions can be seen as a continuation of the purification process, which still influence how museums construct their own identity and their audiences. On most occasions, how a museum identifies itself defines how the museum views its purpose and, in turn, its visitors, research and evaluation. And so, if a visitor's activities and responses do not fit the museum's profile and purpose, such behaviours and responses may be ignored or misclassified. As museum processes are often informed by evaluations, the absence of religious practice in visitor studies and reports maintain their invisibility. In order to understand the failure to recognise or acknowledge the presence of religious practices in museums it is, therefore, vital to explore how visitor evaluations and studies operate.

Segmentation has played a crucial role within the study of museum visitors. Over the past two and a half centuries how visitors are identified, analysed and segmented has become increasingly complex to reflect changes within museums, the public sphere and within the wider population. Whether actively or passively, public museums have used segmentation to demonstrate and, on occasion, defend their role as public services. Thus, the process of segmentation often reveals a great deal about museum institutions' ambitions, prejudices and understandings of their publics. With the exception of identifying visitors' religious affiliation (as demographic data), visitors' religious beliefs and performances (inside and outside the museum) are rarely priorities and, as a result, seldom feature within segmentation models and practices. What was and continues to be priority is proving evidence of museums' educational impact and attracting particular segments of society (often regarded as hard-to-reach). These priorities have shaped the field of museum visitor studies, in terms of how it examines, interprets and perceives the role of the visitor and the museum. Whilst the virtual absence of religious practices and beliefs in museum visitor research is mostly a result of modern audit

culture, these omissions also reflect the ideological process of purification as previously argued.

As the first public museum in Britain, the trustees of the British Museum had a very particular understanding of what was meant by a museum for the “benefit of the public”, as stated in Hans Sloane’s will. According to Anne Goldgar (2000), the museum’s stakeholders saw the public deriving benefit not from visiting, but from the research conducted by the museum’s curators. The British Museum, thus, comprised of three distinct groups; those who were eligible for a visitors’ pass, those who were not; and those who either did not want to visit or did not know they could.<sup>22</sup> For the trustees of the 18<sup>th</sup> century museum, their duty to conserve the collection was at odds with their obligation to allow the public (in limited terms) to visit. But, during the museum’s early decades, a counter-argument was developing momentum, as recorded in the Principal Librarian report of 1810:

It is also frequently lamented by strangers, of more than common curiosity, that... [they] be admitted on certain days... without limitations... this mode, if adopted, appears to me the last step that can be taken towards facilitating a free access to the Museum (British Museum 1810).

That year the museum’s vetting system was scrapped and free access was permitted for all those who wished to attend (albeit on certain days). The opening of the museum, and the emergence of more public museums in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, created new conceptions of the museum public. Whereas the vetting system imposed a non-visitor/visitor dichotomy, the ‘free access’ museums introduced visitor types.

With better access and more museums, 19<sup>th</sup> century classifications of visitors allowed researchers to observe and identify the different ways visitors experienced the displays and objects. In 1904, Francis Bather (1904: 211-2), president of the British Museums Association, listed three museum functions which attract their own distinct audience. These were ‘investigation’ for experts who come to “widen the bounds of knowledge”, ‘instruction’ for amateurs, and students and ‘inspiration’ for the general public through esthetic and intellectual ‘sightseeing’. Bather stressed the distinctness and mutual intolerance of these groups and urged museums to treat them as such. The rigidity of Bather’s classifications denied the visitor the agency to move between these functions or experience something

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<sup>22</sup> Accessing the British Museum was a laborious process when it opened in 1759. People wanting to visit the Museum had to apply in writing. The Principal Librarian then decided whether the applicant was suitable to request a ticket. If they were, they had to write again to request their ticket. As only fifteen visitors were allowed in per hour, demand inevitably exceeded supply (Wilson 2002). However, staff and members were able to bring companions (e.g. students). Tickets could also be obtained on the black market.

other than an intellectual or aesthetic experience. Yet, if the purpose of museums was to benefit the public, the museum's staff and trustees needed to recognise the possibility for (intellectual) mobility. New legislation around schooling, including new assessment procedures, elevated the value of learning across publicly-funded establishments. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the usefulness of the museum as a public institution shifted from being about experts and their research to the public and their education. Although museums were not subject to the same accountabilities as schools (in respect to their educational impact), from the mid-19th to the mid-twentieth century, museums were predominately viewed as places of public improvement and learning.

The decades following the Second World War saw a rapid growth of local museums, which led to questions regarding (local) representation, identity and accessibility for all social classes. Studies into the inequalities within museum practices continued until the end of the century, often focusing on social and cultural diversity. For example, Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) extensive visitor study in 1969 sought to establish whether class (and cultural capital) influenced visiting. The growth of immigration, which increased substantially following the Second World War, changed the population and, in turn, the (potential) museum publics. In order to attract and demonstrate the museums' worth to visitors, staff had to recognise and target these diversifying audiences. In the 1980s, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher advocated a *laissez faire* attitude to the state and society, which left many institutions to face market forces as independent and self-sufficient establishments (Idowu 2009). Cuts to public funding also meant museums had to become more financially sustaining, which led many institutions to introduce admission charges and ticketed blockbuster exhibitions to increase visitor numbers. Cultural institutions were reclassified as service delivery organisations with the visitor, or rather the customer, at the centre (Appleton 2007). Like any other service-provider, museums needed to get to know, serve and satisfy their market. Moreover, they were duty-bound to provide evidence of their success in attracting museum visitors and thus demonstrate their financial value. Thatcher's free market agenda led to a surge in museum visitor studies, albeit in a sometimes limited sense. Although museums during this period were busy determining how they added value as places of education, counting and reporting on visitor numbers took precedent. Museums now existed in a competitive market and were accountable to their existing and potential funders, be they private or public.

In the late 1990s, Labour instigated a change in how museums were conceived in terms of their value and role. The prerogative was now for museums to demonstrate their value as social agents.<sup>23</sup> Visitor numbers were still important, but it was the *type* of visitors that was now of interest. Funding was raised and, for many institutions, admission charges were

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<sup>23</sup> The need to increase visitor numbers and to promote social inclusion and accessibility may have also led to museums circumventing subjects that may be deemed as too sensitive or unpopular. This could explain a reluctance to run exhibitions on contemporary religion.

dropped. New Labour wanted every citizen, community and company to commit and contribute to the same societal goals, from combating crime to improving wellbeing. This 'joined-up thinking' (Lang, et al 2006) resulted in a myriad of new guidance, policies and working groups. Labour named access as the cornerstone to their cultural policy (Coles 1998) and 'increasing access' epitomised the marrying of economic need and socio-cultural ambition. Although, essentially, reducing barriers meant more visitors and more money, as explained in the 1998 Museums & Galleries Commission report *Building Bridges*:

No museum or gallery can afford to ignore the issue of developing new audiences. Through this work, museums and galleries demonstrate an adherence to the notion of equal access. In addition, they can prove their social significance and accountability, increase visitor numbers and visitor income, and meet criteria set by funding bodies (Dodd and Sandell 1998: 5).

Labour's commitment to community cohesion and social inclusion set out to create and support communities that were confident, sustainable and united by a common sense of belonging (Crooke 2007). These aspirations, consequently, produced new targets for museums to achieve and new target groups to reach. Museum audiences were no longer individuals, but categorised, segmented and classified 'group-members' (Appleton 2007).

## **Museum visitor studies in academia**

Academia has played a fundamental role in providing methodologies, models and theories to analyse museum visitors. The field of museum visitor studies has welcomed this contribution and continues to borrow from an array of scholarly disciplines, from psychology and cultural studies to child development and market research. These often overlapping fields have played a particularly dominant role within museum visitor studies. David Uzzell (1993) identifies three phases of summative evaluation research, beginning in the late 1970s. These were behaviourist, cognitive and socio-cognitive studies. Each phase, Uzzell suggests, has built on and addressed the weaknesses of the previous approach. Eileen Hooper-Greenhill (2006: 362) came to a similar conclusion in regard to the development of visitor studies:

there is a move from a narrow backward-looking paradigm based on behaviourist psychology and a transmission or expert-to-novice model of communication to a more open and forward-looking interpretative paradigm that employs a cultural view of communication involving the negotiation of meaning.

One of the earliest psychological studies of visitors was a two-year study of gallery visitors in 1928, by Yale psychology professor Edward Robinson (1928). Through a combination of natural and experimental observation, Robinson sought to find the root of problems such as 'museum fatigue'. Viewing visitors as a homogenous group (although distinguishing between the casual and sophisticated visitor), he dismissed the need to ask visitors what they thought,

stating that “such personal revelations... are sure to be more false than true?” (1928: 11). The study is littered with metaphors from science to validate what he deemed as solvable psychological problems. By limiting his research to behaviour (using tracking studies), Robinson neglected to enquire beyond the surface of the visiting experience to see how visitors engaged with and interpreted the exhibition. Unlike Robinson’s research, contemporary approaches to visitor studies frequently combine observation (in order to note visitors’ physical behaviours) with data collecting methods such as interviews and surveys. This mix-method approach enables the researcher to examine *how* and *why* the visitor engaged with a display. The findings, therefore, provide insights into visitors’ prior experiences and knowledge which, as George Hein (2002) notes, greatly influence visitors’ experiences.

Learning-focused visitor studies also shifted from a pedagogic model to a constructivist interpretation, which reflected the evolution of ideas around knowledge, truth and meaning. Hein (2002) explained this through a distinction between two types of knowledge: knowledge as independent of the learner and knowledge as constructed in the mind of the learner. The latter theory states that the learner’s previous knowledge frames their interpretation of what he or she encounters. Cultural and sociological theories further developed ideas and concepts around the influence of the socio-cultural context on how the learner interprets and engages with information and ideas. Accordingly, the perception of the visitor experience went from one that concerned private encounters to one that was inherently social. However, this social context predominately focused on human interactions and seldom considered relationships with other types of beings.

Gordon Fyfe (2006: 45) described a cultural turn in museum studies with the introduction of sociology, which brought with it new topics such as the body, emotions, senses, memory and lifestyle. He argued that unlike the museum visitor researcher, who is expected to understand the consciousness of visitors, the sociologist aims to illustrate how “the inner worlds of visitors, non visitors, and curators are constituted out of their mutual and dialogic dependence on the museum”. The introduction of sociology to museum visitor studies provided the potential for new perspectives, but overall failed to examine the role of religious practices and beliefs in the museum. By contrast, a number of studies within anthropology have explored the role of ritual objects in contemporary practices within museums.<sup>24</sup> However, these anthropological studies tend to focus on discreet communities who have a familial, spiritual or cultural association with the objects. Hence, such research rarely considers how people of different religious and nonreligious identities interact with museum displays.

The relationship between the museum and academia has changed dramatically over the past two hundred years. Museums in the 18<sup>th</sup> century provided the means for groundbreaking

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<sup>24</sup> For example, see Herle (1994), Hamilton (2010), Harrison, *et al.* (2012) and Candlin (2013).

scholarly research. However, as Charles Haxthausen (2002) argues, as museums moved closer to the commercially driven entertainment industry they drifted further away from their academic roots. According to Haxthausen, continuing cuts to public arts funding in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, coupled with the pursuit for museums to make more money and reach more visitors, only served to deepen the rift. Universities were also less likely to view museums as places for serious scholarship. This division dented the museums' reputation as legitimate institutions for critical research. However, the emergence of museum studies (or museology) redefined the museum within academic research. The field was established, not as an institution for research but as the focus of it. These developments formed a distinction between two types of museum visitor studies: (1) the academic study of museum practices and audiences and (2) visitor studies conducted (or commissioned) by the museums themselves (usually in the form of visitor evaluation). Yet, due to the ever-increasing demand for museums to demonstrate their impact (be it social, cultural or economic) most studies consist of evaluations conducted by museum staff or external agencies.

More recently, the influence of studies exploring material culture and space has, in part, brought focus back to the object and the physical environment of the museum. Examples include Rita Kottasz (2006) and Regan Forrest's (2013) research on affect and the role of the environment on visitors' behaviour and attitudes. Both papers borrow from retail studies in order to identify the ways in which specific elements within the museum material and sensorial space bring about certain responses. In these studies, the authors demonstrate how atmospheric variables (Forrest 2013) and cues (Kottasz 2006) – such as lighting, colours, music, layout, crowding and the placement of objects – can impact on individual visitors in terms of what they notice, recall and learn. A number of researchers have also explored the impact of visitors' embodied behaviours on things and people within close proximity. These include Christidou Dimitra's (2012) work on visitors pointing to exhibits, Meisner et al's (2007) study on visitors using computer screens and Dirk vom Lehn and Christian Heath's research (2005) on interactive exhibits using ethnomethodology. Studies that focus on movement and space, such as the work by Space Syntax (2015) at the British Museum in 2004 and 2005, also draw attention to the ways spatial layout affect visitors' experiences. Their studies, which they describe as "science-based and human-focused", aimed to improve visitor flow patterns by observing how people engage with and negotiate static things (be they signs, walls or artefacts) and other visitors. This growing body of research provide valuable conceptual and methodological approaches to study the interrelationship between visitors and things.

## **Visitor evaluation**

Evaluation and research often use the same methods for gathering and analysing data (Miles 1993), but differ in their intentions. In essence, museum visitor evaluations are conducted in order to inform the exhibition process, whereas research aims to raise or resolve fundamental questions about the nature of museums and its visitors (Durant 1996). Visitor evaluation is

also increasingly being used to provide evidence of impact to funders and sponsors. The most popular and simplest form of measuring impact is to count visitors, which provides both quantifiable and comparable data. As part of their funding agreement, museums sponsored by the government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS 2008) are required to submit their attendance figures (segmented by age, disability, socio-economic group and activity).<sup>25</sup> The statistics are then pooled across all publically-funded cultural institutions to determine which sectors of society are engaging with the cultural institutions and which are not.

Funders' evaluation tools and methods provide many museums with their only form of visitor monitoring. For example, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) state that their evaluation models have two purposes: 'proving', which demonstrates that change is taking place as a result of the project, and 'improving', which concerns the post-project benefits in terms of learning, growth and sustainability (NEF 2007).<sup>26</sup> Having this quantitative and qualitative evidence from their grant recipients enables the HLF to *prove* to their funders that they are providing impact. Such visitor evaluation frameworks allow museums to determine and present their social, cultural and educational value in a format that can be easily translated to external stakeholders. Although the concepts of value and impact can be fluid and open to negotiation, the type of evaluation required by funders often embodies the funders' strategic objectives. For instance, the objectives of government-funded projects are typically aligned to government policies. These aims permeate through to the evaluations' use of terminology, segmentation and priorities. This is clearly evident in the Museum, Libraries and Archives Association (MLA) General Social Outcomes-based evaluation framework. Published in 2005, the framework reflects a number of local government National Indicators set out by central government (MLA 2008a).<sup>27</sup> Together with the MLA's Generic Learning Outcomes, introduced three years earlier, the museums that used these frameworks collectively provided the means to convince the Treasury to award more money for more projects (Selwood 2010). The MLA's best-practice frameworks are promoted to all museums as 'one size fits all' models for visitor evaluation. However, the models' objectives restrict what visitor behaviours and responses are recorded and analysed, and therefore overlook other types of experiences.

The purposefulness of evaluation programmes has led to most museums adopting an 'outcome-based' approach. 'Outcome-based' evaluation measures the success of an exhibition by how well the outcomes match the objectives, which are typically defined by the

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<sup>25</sup> For a list of sponsored museums see [http://www.culture.gov.uk/what\\_we\\_do/museums\\_and\\_galleries/6756.aspx](http://www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/museums_and_galleries/6756.aspx)

<sup>26</sup> The HLF distributes money raised through the National Lottery.

<sup>27</sup> The outcomes are stronger and safer communities, health and well-being, and strengthening public life (MLA 2008b).

museum staff.<sup>28</sup> A multi-stage process of evaluation is therefore used by many institutions to determine how best to plan, develop, deliver, review and ultimately learn from each exhibition.<sup>29</sup> Andrew Pekarik (2010: 108), at the Smithsonian Institution (USA), warns of the risks of using this approach:

Objectives or outcomes are like an arrangement of funnels meant to neatly channel the unruly flow of visitor experiences into bottles for measurement and labelling. But visitors in exhibitions are not under the museum's control.

According to Pekarik this approach not only disregards the unforeseen and the unintended, but also distinguishes between a right and a wrong visitor-exhibition encounter. In the summative evaluation report of the V&A Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East (Fakatseli and Sachs 2008), the consultancy company identified the museum's aims for the exhibition and demonstrated, through a combination of methods, whether the exhibition succeeded in meeting its objectives. For example, the visitors were asked to recall what interpretative devices they encountered. The results, therefore, only recorded and presented visitors' interactions with identified elements within the exhibition, which left no opportunity to capture other types of experiences. Methods which funnel away experiences that do not fit within the pre-determined criteria can only ever offer a blinkered view of what is taking place during a visit.

Visitor studies that are not born out of the need to legitimate a specific activity are often viewed as unfocused and unsuited to providing the results and recommendations required by museum project teams. Adrian Barton (2008: 275) referred to such research as inherently problematic:

The problem lies in the fact that there is little or no space built into the system to allow 'different' work. Put another way, 'good work' becomes that which is covered by the PI [performance indicator]... As a result, some types of work and some types of professional practice become seen as 'difficult' because they are not susceptible to this form of evaluation.

Doing something different in research will always raise questions of value and rigour. Yet for research, in contrast to visitor evaluation, the outcome is not to directly inform museum processes by measuring impact. Rather, research offers a different type of value by addressing

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<sup>28</sup> Christian Heath and Maurice Davies (2012), writing on the Museums Association blog, argued that "many summative evaluations seem to set out to demonstrate success... [as they] are expected to achieve the impossible: to help museums learn from failure, while proving the project met all its objectives".

<sup>29</sup> Commonly known as front-end, formative and summative evaluation.

and raising new questions about the nature of the visitor and the museum. In a speech in 2006, Tessa Jowell, the former Culture Secretary, criticised this outcome-focused culture within the heritage sector: “Management consultants like to chant that ‘what gets measured, gets done’. But the trouble is, you cannot measure everything of value” (DCMS 2006). As Jowell declared, assessing visitor experiences against already pre-empted criterion will inevitably lead to a skewed view of what is actually going on. As a result, inaccurate perceptions of what happens and does not happen at museums may continue.

The summative evaluation report for the V&A’s Jameel Gallery of Islamic Middle East, by Audience Focus Inc (Fakatseli and Sachs 2006), also demonstrated the perils of matching responses to a prescribed framework. Audience Focus asked visitors to complete Personal Meaning Maps. Participants were told to write as many words or phrases, in relation to the words “Islamic Art”. Nearly half of the participants responded with terms and statements related to religion. However, the report did not provide a category to accommodate visitor motivation types that accommodate religious motives. As a result, the religiously motivated visitor was assigned to either the ‘aesthetic experience’ category or the ‘education’ motivation type, neither of which sufficiently described the visitor’s relationship with the gallery’s content.<sup>30</sup> Identifying religious subjectivities was not a major goal for the museum. This was also implied by a curator at the V&A who stated, in response to feedback about the Asia galleries:

The Buddhist group appeared to prioritise the religious interpretation and atmosphere of the gallery. However .... while attempting to take account of the groups’ wishes the V&A is a museum of art and design rather than of religion in itself and while the context of the images is very important their artistic interpretation is central (Nightingale and Greene 2010: 151).

As this response illustrates, prioritising the aesthetic and educational objectives can restrict which types of visitor experiences are recognised. In a cross-cultural study of visitor responses to displays of early humans, anthropologist Monique Scott presented her participants with a list of evolutionary-based statements.<sup>31</sup> Scott (2007: 12) admits her surprise at her participants’ responses:

Confronted with challenging origins-orientated topics such as the nature of humanity, racial origins, and racial differences, religion and spirituality, interviewees’ performance anxiety became an unexpected yet important aspect of the research environment.

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<sup>30</sup> The third motivation type was ‘practical issues’, such as free entry.

<sup>31</sup> Statements included “Humans and dinosaurs lived at the same time” and “Modern humans evolved less than 50,000 years ago” (Scott, 2007: 158).

For some visitors, these unintended insights are not peripheral to their visiting experience but central. Yet these comments were not anticipated and so could not be accounted for in the research frameworks.

Summative evaluations frequently borrow metaphors and methods from marketing analyses and educational assessments (Golding 2009). These approaches are reliant on there being assessable behaviour and conclusive successes and failures. The need to isolate direct causality (Scott 2009) means that evaluators tend to value the information that can be coded, measured and compared. Anecdotal evidence that does not fit is often relegated to the report appendices or left out completely (as the responses were not perceived as significant to the main findings). Together with the economic pressures to demonstrate value, this has had a profound influence on the field of visitor research.

### **Goal-free evaluations**

To address the rigidity of outcome-frameworks within visitor studies, many museums have turned to more open-ended methods of evaluating their visitors. In his *Evaluation Thesaurus*, first published in 1980, Michael Scriven (1991) distinguished between what he called 'goal-based evaluation' and 'goal-free evaluation'. In goal-free evaluation "the evaluator is not told the purpose of the program but does the evaluation with the purpose of finding out what the program *is* actually *doing* without being cued as to what it is *trying* to do" (1991: 180, original emphasis). Scriven explains that if the program is achieving its objectives, then what it is trying to achieve will appear in the findings. Goal-free evaluation (in what he calls its *pure* state) averts evaluator-imposed assumptions and bias. Scriven upholds this as an ideal and admits that it is difficult to avoid conceiving some idea of what the goals may be. He offers a compromise that begins with goal-free evaluation to establish what is taking place and then switches to goal-based evaluation in order to measure and analyse. In visitor studies, this process involves evaluators asking visitors more open-ended questions (such as why they came to the museum). From this, evaluators can identify themes to devise categories that shape objectives and subsequent evaluations. This approach, therefore, provides more opportunities to capture unforeseen responses and practices.

Visitor studies and evaluation models often acknowledge the social dimensions of the museum visit (such as Black 2005, Fyfe 2006, and vom Lehn and Heath 2007). For example, in their writings about visitor identities and motivations, Falk and Dierking (2012: 149) stated that "the museum experience is, first and foremost, a social one... [and] a way for visitors to connect with one another and find meaning together". In visitor studies, the social experience typically refers to interactions between relatives, friends or members of an organised group. However, studies rarely consider that the visitors' social experiences in a museum may encompass interactions with other types of 'beings' such as divine or supernatural entities. Even in more open-ended studies the 'social' visit is largely considered a human-only activity.

Conversely, the museum visit is also frequently considered an individualised activity. Richard Sandell (2007) observed that, in studies of prejudice and museums, the influence of social psychology had led most researchers and theorists to locate prejudice at an individual level. However, perceiving the museum visit as an individualised experience, argued Sandell, risks ignoring the social and political contexts visitors and museums operate in. Studies also run a risk of overlooking religious contexts, which may encompass religious authorities and communities as well as deities, (deceased) ancestors and other supernatural entities. Even when visitors' religious motivations are acknowledged, the experience is often described as individual. For example, Tiffany Jenkins (2005) in her critique on museum practices, stated that people may visit museums "for devotional purposes [but]... such acts are the result of private decisions by individuals and are not in any way formalised or endorsed by secular institutions." Similarly, Gregor T Goethals (1990: 161) in his article 'Ritual and the Representation of Power in High and Popular Art', argued:

If museums have become sacred places in a technological society, the devotions practiced there are individual. Unlike the traditional ritual spaces of traditional religions, there are no corporate prayers or communal ritual performances at the shrines of art museums.

Both Jenkins and Goethals assert that as museums do not provide the formalised social and sacred structures found in places of worship, visitors' religious practices are internalised and a matter of personal choice. Such understandings discount the fact that some museum visitors perform embodied religious acts in galleries and that groups of visitors come to the museum for religious purposes. Furthermore, these individualised accounts of visitors' experiences (and the limited conception of who can be 'social' during a visit) neglect the influential role sacred beings may play in interactions. Even in the analyses of seemingly open-ended interview-based research, the interactions that are recorded fail to capture the diversity of visitors' social interactions. Museum visitor consultant Paulette McManus (1990: 125) warns observation and tracking methods "characteristically focus on a single person as the unit of study" and thus discount the interactions between visitors and other types of presences. In order to understand the ways in which visitors and objects are engaged within religious practices, recognising the relationships between human and non-human 'beings' is critical.

## **Knowledge and experience**

Museum visitor studies often evaluate the museum visit by comparing differences between visitors' knowledge and experiences on their arrival and their departure. Falk (1992) identifies two types of knowledge that visitors bring to their visit. The first is 'exhibition knowledge' which refers to previous experience of the content while the second, 'museum literacy', concerns experience of exhibition cues. In the summative evaluation of the British Library's

exhibition *Sacred: Discover What We Share* (27 April – 23 September 2007), the report concluded:

People seemed to engage with the items on display at an individual level... rather than appreciating a thread or a story running throughout the exhibition pulling the individual artefacts together... A classic case of not being able to see the wood for the trees (Creative Research 2007).

In this report, Creative Research judged the audience's comprehension on Falk's second type of knowledge, 'museum literacy'. In contrast, the evaluation and measurement of knowledge and understanding in the report on the V&A's Jameel Gallery focuses on 'exhibition knowledge'. Employing an educational framework (and using a knowledge hierarchy model), the evaluators imposed a clear distinction between what was a correct and incorrect response. Evaluations usually assess visitors' understanding of exhibitions on a combination of these two types of knowledge. However, as Linda Duke argues (2010), the experience available to the museum or gallery visitor "falls outside of the right/wrong, true/false paradigms" that exist in formal educational institutions. Methods that measure and assess their galleries and exhibitions using such binaries and scales suggest that there is an ideal museum experience. This raises questions about whether certain museum engagements should be subjected to such methods of measurement and comparison. Interactions within museums are about more than learning and retaining facts. Visitors' interactions may also be shaped by what is not known or, as Duke (2010) explains:

Works of art created within mediation traditions... attribute explicit value to the unknowable, the undifferentiated, that which is beyond reason. In these traditions there is awareness of the boundless potential that lies outside of the structures of ordinary (as opposed to poetic) language and social value.

The unknowable and inexpressible is a central component of people's experiences with sacred objects (Arthur 2000). The knowledge and learning models employed by many researchers, especially in summative evaluations, poses a conundrum. What is evaluated if not knowledge? Csíkszentmihályi and Hermanson (1999) extend the concept of museum learning beyond knowledge acquisition, explaining it as a process of open interaction that involves the intellectual, sensory and emotional faculties. Furthermore, Csíkszentmihályi and Csíkszentmihályi (1992: 86) state that visitors' experiences may be motivated by positive as well as negative emotions such as "feelings of frustration with the limits of the human condition". The failure to recognise that museum engagements can reference the positive and negative and the knowable and the unknowable may ignore (and potentially mask) the complex interactions that constitute engagements between visitors and sacred objects.

Most museum evaluators, both internal and contracted, employ the notion of 'meaning-making' as a way to measure engagement and, more specifically, express how much visitors

are able to construct meaningful encounters with the exhibits. Research consultants Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (MHM), who conduct visitor evaluations for many of the UK's national museums, clearly view museums as learning environments and places of 'meaning-making'. Yet, meaning-making suggests that the interaction is a cognitive task. Focusing on cognition alone fails to acknowledge the impact of visitors' embodied acts and the material things visitors may bring to the museum (from jewellery to guidebooks). In a discussion between museum professionals organised by Denver Art Museum (USA), the contributors expressed their reluctance to focus solely on learning. Instead they described museum visits as "personally meaningful experiences" (Fischer and Levinson 2010). By the same token, art historian Henry John Drewal (2009) highlights the importance of our senses in *making sense* of the world. These variations of 'meaning making' provide a more holistic approach to understand and evaluate the visitor. However, recognising the role of material and religious practices should not replace the role of learning in the relationship between the religious visitor and the sacred object. Learning about one's religion can be both an educational exercise and a religious practice. How these two practices engage vary, but they are often so entwined that attempts to distinguish between them would ultimately undermine their religious significance. However, visitor evaluations rarely acknowledge these other forms of 'meaning making'. Again, this reflects secular approaches to learning which are often associated with museums.

### **Religious nomenclature in studies of museums**

The vocabulary and metaphors of religion are often used, within museum visitor studies and evaluations, to describe certain encounters, sensations and spaces that are more emotional, as opposed to intellectual or experiential. Religion provides a depository of abstract concepts available to both religious and secular publics. For example, Kenneth Yellis (2000: 186) stated that visitors he spoke to frequently likened the museum to places of "mystical or religious experiences of great power". On a similar note, John Falk (1992: 15) deduced that museums offer something similar to a religious experience as places of "peace and fantasy" where the visitor can escape the mundane, work-a-day world". In using religious nomenclature, are Falk and Yellis implying that the visitors' experiences are religious or religious-like? For instance, a museum and a place of worship may provide spaces for contemplation, but this quality is not a religious attribute, it is an attribute they share. MHM use the term 'spiritual' in their Hierarchy of Visitor Engagement model to describe the highest level of engagement.<sup>32</sup> The motivation statements identified with this level refer to feeling peaceful, contemplative and creative (MHM 2005). Should a visitor describe an encounter in which he or she experiences a divine presence, how can this model distinguish between what is 'spiritual' in the mundane sense

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<sup>32</sup> The engagement types in this model, in ascending order, are Social, Intellectual, Emotional and Spiritual.

and *spiritual* in the religious context? By mixing both religious and mundane experiences in this 'Spiritual' category, religious practices are obscured and thus interpreted as disembodied, dematerialised and private experiences.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, the lowest form of engagement in MHM's model is 'Social' which is the only level to recognise embodied experiences, albeit with other (human) visitors.

The confusion around the term 'spiritual' presents itself in John Falk's (2008: 30) definition of 'Spiritual Pilgrims'. As one of his 'identity-related visit motivations', he defines 'Spiritual Pilgrims' as:

Visitors who are primarily seeking to have a contemplative, spiritual and/or restorative experience. They see the museum as a refuge from the work-a-day world or as a confirmation of their religious beliefs.

Whilst Falk's definition of spiritual includes religious beliefs, the religious element becomes somewhat muddled with the individualised experience associated with wanting to escape and rest. These two evocations of spiritual do not necessarily coexist or constitute the same type of experience. Furthermore, by citing religious beliefs (and not practices), the 'pilgrim' category is only able to account for disembodied and dematerialised forms of religion. Falk (2008: 32) then suggests, that in order to assist and cater for the 'Spiritual Pilgrim', staff should identify the quieter and most peaceful places and times for Spiritual Pilgrims to visit so they can "find the rejuvenation they seek". Yet visitors who are seeking 'spiritual' or religious experiences may not necessarily desire or expect silence and solitude. In his description of this category, Falk does not elaborate on his declaration that Spiritual Pilgrims may visit as "confirmation of their religious beliefs". However, by suggesting that these 'Pilgrims' visit the museum in order to affirm their beliefs (as a cognitive task), the category fails to account for visitors who perform devotional acts. In *Museum Experience Revisited*, Falk and Lynn Dierking (2012: 48) rename the 'Spiritual Pilgrim' segment to 'Rechargers' and propose two additional categories (although admit that these categories are not "fully researched"). Here the term pilgrim reappears but this time as 'Respectful Pilgrims' "who visit museums out of a sense of duty or obligation to honour the memory of those represented by an institution" (2012: 48). In contrast, 'Affinity Seekers' visit "because it speaks to their sense of heritage and or... identity or personhood" (2012: 49). These sub-categories provide more scope to accommodate the varied ways museums enable different practices. Yet they still fail to recognise that museum objects can elicit religious encounters that the visitor neither desired nor expected. Moreover, they say little about the nature of devotional acts within the museum. Writing about visitor evaluation, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill (2004: 521) asserted that "secular metaphors" can "hide

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<sup>33</sup> UK art galleries Tate (2012) use the same four terms for their 'motivational drivers'. For the 'Spiritual'-driven visitor "Tate acts as a spiritual place for finding inspiration and fulfilment".

the links to religious practices, those of evangelism and conversion”.<sup>34</sup> And so, whilst Falk and Dierking’s categories may appear to encapsulate visitors’ religious experiences, they only address forms of interactions that prioritise the individual and, thereby, dismiss the possible influence of divine or supernatural entities.

Terms associated with religion are occasionally used to describe unfavourable ambiances and experiences within museums. One such example is Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990: 112) criticism that museums impose “religious silence” on its visitors. Similarly, Didier Maleuvre (1999: 101), in illustrating a typical 19<sup>th</sup> century French museum, also described visitors having to “observe religious silence and self-restraint... [to avoid] ridicule and sanction”. Describing museum and visitor traits using metaphors relating to religion suggest that, although museums and places of religious worship share similarities, the institutions are (or should be) distinct. In reviewing this usage it appears that in most cases negative associations are used to describe institutional practices while positive traits describe personal experiences (such as respite, contemplation and renewal). Of course, this distinction depends on whether one perceives religious institutions favourably or unfavourably. And so when Bourdieu and Maleuvre declare that museums force a religious silence on its visitors, what they are referring to is the imposed and circumscribed practices associated with religious institutions. I therefore suggest that this personal/institutional distinction indicates a lingering wariness around explicit and authorised expressions of religion in museums. Similarly, places of worship use the word ‘museum’ or even ‘museumfied’ to convey a sense of inactivity. These sentiments were evoked in Archbishop Dolan’s address at the inauguration of St. Patrick’s Old Cathedral, New York. In describing the Cathedral he told the congregation: “This is not a museum, this is not some historical artefact... This is still a living, breathing, loving, embracing, serving parish” (McDonnell 2010). This sentiment is frequently repeated on church websites and leaflets. The Archbishop’s attempt to distance the Cathedral from museums exposes an anxiety around the religious institution’s image (as an obsolete relic in the face of dwindling attendance figures) or about its dual and sometimes conflicting role as a site of devotion and of tourism. His address also demonstrates how the museum can be seen as negative influences on religious institutions. The interplay of these metaphors reaffirms the complex entanglements that exist between museums and places of worship, which work to both consolidate and distance. More generally, the use of such metaphors and analogies mask the complex and diverse ways that individuals experience divine and supernatural presences both inside and outside the museum.

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<sup>34</sup> Hooper-Greenhill (2004) states that the term ‘transmission’, which she uses in her ‘transmission model of communication’ (to explain the communicative relationship between museums and visitors) reflects a Christian morality around improvement and civilisation.

## Conclusion

The Enlightenment, which caused so much change in the conceptualisation of religion and materiality, is embedded within our museums, our ways of engaging with objects, and the ways we practise and perceive religion today. Although the Enlightenment is often viewed as the period in which religion was marginalised, Protestant beliefs and ideas continued to shape public life and, for that matter, public museums. Whilst attempts to separate out religion (and God) from museums have led many to perceive museums (and the Enlightenment) as secular, the purification process has also masked the continuing influence of Protestantism on the ways visitors interpret and interact with objects. These processes ultimately structured and constructed conceptions of religion, materiality and the museum visitor. Practices, such as object-venerating activities associated with Catholicism, were not erased from the visiting experience, but instead overlooked or seldom addressed. In order to counter the work of purification, it is necessary to reintroduce materiality and religion to the study of museum visitors, and therefore, contest these attempts to 'write out' religion from museums. It is also important to note that the purification processes described in relation to religion, museums and museum visitor studies were not a universal phenomenon, but a specific outcome of an array of cultural, social, religious and educational processes.

Purification is also active within museum visitor studies and evaluations. As many museums use the same models and categories these omissions continue to neglect religious practices and beliefs. Repeating the same surveys and models have a valuable function in enabling comparisons between years, museums and countries. However, over time, the language, terms and models become more embedded and leave little room for flexibility. Similarly, established segmentation categories are useful for comparing expectations and motivations, but these often rigid classifications also discount other behaviours, expectations and needs. As a result, what does not fit may be ignored or forced into an existing but wholly inappropriate category. Moreover, as more museums are actively inviting researchers from visitor studies into the creative process of exhibition development, visitor studies are having a much greater influence in the shaping of museum practice. It is, therefore, necessary to step back and see what else is taking place in museum galleries. In order to understand the role of museum visitors' religious practices and beliefs a new conceptual language and framework for interpreting visitors' experiences is required. This is not only important for informing the evaluation process, but for reflecting on the efficacy and suitability of existing and emerging approaches.

The field of museum visitor studies provides many approaches and theories to observe, analyse and interpret visitor behaviour, but without acknowledging and understanding the role religious practices and beliefs play in visitors' lives, we cannot begin to investigate these forms of engagement. The next chapter will therefore attend to the role of materiality and practices within religious studies, which will help to shed light on developing approaches

around lived experiences. Equally crucial, within this research, is the recognition that objects and divine and supernatural beings can affect and act upon visitors and, therefore, influence people's interactions with museum displays. To do this, a new framework for understanding agency is required which recognises that humans are not the sole source of action. The second half of the next chapter will therefore introduce a network approach for examining humans and non-humans and, thereby, leaving aside the antimaterialism associated with Protestantism and the Enlightenment.

## chapter three:

# MATERIALITY, RELIGION AND AGENCY

In the previous chapter, I argued that museum visitor studies lack the theoretical frameworks and knowledge to examine the ways religious practices and beliefs shape visitors' museum interactions. In order to address these gaps and oversights, this chapter will introduce the study of material religion. The study of material religion, as a sub-field of religious studies, attends to material 'things', practices and spaces within people's religious lives. By addressing past belief-centred (and Protestant-influenced) studies of religion, the study of material religion directs the scholarly gaze to embodied and material practices. It therefore offers an array of theoretical concepts and approaches to understand the complex ways individuals and communities interact with objects within religious activities. Central to this literature is the notion of mediation as the means to connect the material world to the immaterial (and supernatural) realm. Moreover, by focusing on scholarship identified with the 'Lived Religion' approach, the complexities of social, embodied and material interactions can be examined. The second part of this chapter considers the role of agency. Museum visitor studies, as previously discussed, rarely acknowledges the active role material objects and divine/supernatural beings play in visitors' experiences. Most studies, instead, perceive the museum visit as being predominately shaped by the actions and intentions of the human actors (including the visitors, the museum staff, as well as those working within funding bodies and government). In order to understand how religious experiences of divine and supernatural beings are made real, it is essential to recognise that non-human entities (such as God and material forms) act on one another. This chapter, therefore, introduces a framework for examining interactions by describing them as networks. This approach, drawn from Actor Network Theory (ANT), will provide a way to address how people and things interact within networks of human and non-human entities. By the end of this chapter, I will suggest a range of concepts and approaches from material religion studies and ANT in order to specifically address the ways that visitors interact with sacred objects and beings in museums.

### **The materiality of religion**

The influential role of Protestantism, as discussed in the previous chapter, was also active in shaping the study of religion. Again, the Christian Enlightenment worked to rid material forms and rituals from people's religious lives through purification. These processes (officially)

presented experiences of the divine as disembodied, dematerialised and transcendent. The rejection and denial of material forms in religious practices framed how religion was viewed and the legacy of this separation continues today. This led many scholars to define religion within a Protestant theological framework, which resulted in a study of religion that was fixated on belief and the written and spoken word. As Birgit Meyer (2008: 227) explains, “[i]n many of the definitions of religion ‘as we know it’ things play a subordinate role, and religion is often framed in opposition to materiality”. This is evident in the Western definitions of transcendence (situated within a Protestant perspective) which describes the state as being beyond the limits of the material or physical world. Yet, this explanation disregards the world in which the transcendent individual operates. In a transcendent state an individual can be ‘elsewhere’ while simultaneously bound to his or her material and lived body (Sobchack 2008). Thus, interpreting religion through a belief-centred prism exposes discrepancies between what is perceived in theory and in practice, as every interaction incorporates physical and material practices.

Protestantism’s preoccupation with textual documents (primarily Scripture) resulted in a lack of research into the material culture of religion. This is due to a number of factors. For instance, religions that centred upon a sacred text were deemed as more advanced than those that did not. As Friedrich Max Müller (1882: 53) proclaimed in his 1870 lecture: “To the student of religion canonical books are, no doubt, of the utmost importance”. The major religions of the West (namely the Abrahamic religions), were also viewed as inherently “belief-centered” (Keane 2008) and so beliefs were privileged over their material manifestations. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, this Eurocentric way of viewing religion distanced the monotheistic religions from what was seen as the debauched practices of idolatry and paganism (Paden 2005). Of course it is far easier to perceive other (foreign) religions as more reliant on material forms, as it is the material forms which are most evident to the outsider. Less accessible, or available, are the underlying beliefs and narratives associated with the materials.

According to Peter Harrison (1990: 2) these ways of interpreting different faiths:

paved the way for the development of a secular study of the religions, and equally importantly, of a concept ‘religion’ which could link together and relate the apparently disparate religious beliefs and practices found in the empirical ‘religions’.

The study of religion was situated within the realm of rationality, universal laws and comparability. And so we find that the study of religion and museum practices operate under the guise of a ‘secular’ way of seeing, when, in fact, these practices were (and are) also defined by Protestantism, as part of a wider movement within modernity linked to the Enlightenment. In the following section, I will examine how new approaches within the study of religion are developing different ways to understand how materiality and practices affect

the everyday lives of devotees. In doing so, I will assess how these developments may help to guide research into visitor engagements between objects and religion.

## **(Re-)introducing materiality**

At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new hybrid of disciplines developed that centred on religious practices, and in particular on the central role objects play in people's religious lives. Focused around a journal entitled *Material Religion*, which was conceived in 2003 and first published in 2005, its founders announced that this new field of study would treat "material objects and practices as primary evidence and... [engage] in critical reflection on the cultural construction of materiality" (Meyer, et al. 2010). Its key contributors (Birgit Meyer, David Morgan, S. Brent Plate and Crispin Paine) situated the origins of the interdisciplinary field in the studies of material culture, visual culture and museums (Meyer et al. 2010). However, the study of material religion is the descendant of a far greater gene pool, which includes socio-cultural disciplines such as art history, archaeology and anthropology. All these disciplines examine objects associated with religion, but in different ways. Material religion studies, which places embodied practice at the centre of analysis, therefore includes a broad range of styles, scholars, techniques and theoretical ideas. Informed almost predominately by qualitative research, material religion studies include descriptions, analyses and investigations into real-life encounters with religious material forms.<sup>35</sup> The field is, therefore, well suited to observation-based ethnographic research. It also sits in contrast to quantitative methods that, when used alone, are arguably ineffective in capturing the subtleties and sensitivities of religious practices and beliefs. Likewise, methods such as semiotic and content analysis often fail to acknowledge the role that material forms play in concrete practices and performances (although research of this kind is occasionally classed within the 'material religion studies' remit). The study of material religion, as a discipline informed by empirical research, therefore relates to the study of 'lived religion' which also aims to draw attention to practice.

## **Lived religion**

The study of 'lived religion' focuses on the diverse and intricate ways people create their religious lives, both individually and collectively. In essence, the approach highlights:

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<sup>35</sup> In addition to the journal, publications within this field include Colleen McDannel's (1995) *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America*, E. Frances King's (2010) *Material Religion and Popular Culture*, Jeremy Stolow's (2010) *Orthodox by Design: Judaism, Print Politics, and the ArtScroll Revolution*, Inge Daniels' (2010) *The Japanese House: Material Culture in the Modern Home* and David Morgan's (2012) *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling*.

how particular people, in particular places and times, live in, with, through and against the religious idioms available to them in culture – *all* the idioms, including (often enough) those not explicitly ‘their own’ (Hall 1997: 7).

Through exploring these narratives, the researcher can investigate how religious practices and beliefs are performed and negotiated within the context of the everyday, as opposed to discrete religious events or experiences isolated from nonreligious practices.

In *Lived Religion in America*, David Hall (1997) traces the scholarly history of the study of lived religion to the term ‘popular religion’, used most frequently in opposition to ‘official religion’. In 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, this distinction was used to validate the Christian Church and disparage the continuing prevalence of pagan and folk practices. What was observed in popular religion, Hall explains, was an ambiguous form of religion which mixed elements from the dominant faith of the nation and from local rituals and beliefs associated with pagan culture. In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popular/official religion distinction was reconsidered. Writing in 1979, sociologist P. H. Vrijhof (1979: 695) defined popular religion as “religion as it is lived in daily life”, which sat in contrast to the unchanging system of circumscribed rules and doctrines imposed by ‘official religion’. As with the distinction noted a century earlier, the terms are particularly loaded. Whereas the scholars of the 19<sup>th</sup> century looked disapprovingly on ‘popular religion’, as amalgamations of debased and approved worship, Vrijhof and his contemporaries hailed ‘popular religion’ as a new approach to studying the lived reality of the laity. According to Vrijhof (1979: 697) this ‘lived religion’ approach involved “the notion of religion as a dynamic process with its endogenous and exogenous aspects of change”, and so acknowledged the influential interplay of micro and macro factors on a community’s religious practices. Borrowing from cultural anthropology, he suggests the use of emic, or internally generated, concepts and interpretations in order to study religion “from within” (Vrijhof 1979: 696) and therefore counter the ethnocentrism of previous studies.

In the early 1980s, religious historian William Christian (1981: 178) expressed his dissatisfaction with the ambivalent ‘popular’ label and suggested the categories of “religion as practiced” and “religion as prescribed”. However, this two-category approach suggests that ‘prescribed religion’ sits in opposition to ‘practised religion’, when in reality their relationship is incredibly ambivalent and often blurred. Almost thirty years later, Meredith B. McGuire (2008: 12) employed the term ‘lived religion’ to distinguish “the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally-defined beliefs and practices”. Although McGuire warns that a distinction between ‘prescribed’ and ‘practised’ religion implies that there is a preferred and more acceptable form of religion, McGuire’s definition of lived religion is, in fact, centred on this binary. Nevertheless, Hall (1997) argues that the study of lived religion breaks away from such oppositions as the ways people practise their religious lives is informed by prescribed religion and vice versa. Furthermore, both categories are

continuously renegotiated, contested and interconnected. These relationships are also relevant not only for those who practise religion, but also for those who do not.

Objects and information from different religions can also affect how people conduct their lives. At the British Museum exhibition *Images and Sacred Texts: Buddhism Across Asia* (14 October 2010 - 3 April 2011), a visitor was observed mimicking the hand gestures of one of the Buddhist statues. Describing herself as Catholic, she explained that as well as being religious she was also “getting more spiritual... because I am learning about other people’s views and that helps to see other perspectives”. Meditation, the visitor disclosed, helped with her relationship to God: “Some people would say that was wrong, but the Lord says ‘meditate on my word’”. Discussing the Buddha statues and images of Christ, the visitor concluded that she saw Buddha “not as my saviour but as a conduit [to God]”. Whilst the visitor’s comments and embodied behaviour may be seen as unconventional, it made sense to her and allowed her to make sense of the sacred objects that she encountered in the museum that day. Her engagement, therefore, mixed and modified a number of religions. By focusing on practice, the lived religion approach draws attention to the ways such concoctions are formed and experienced. It also situates these interactions within specific times and places, “as lived bodies we are always grounded in the radical materialism of bodily immanence, in the “here” and “now” of our sensual existence” (Sobchack 2008). The approach, therefore, takes in to consideration the many aspects that impact upon the engagement.

In his writings on lived religion, Hall (1997: xii) warns that “the fullness of any person’s religious practice cannot be summed up by what happens in a single location”. The methods identified with the study of museum visitors, which traditionally use only the setting of the museum to examine visitors, would struggle to provide the opportunities to explore the many personal narratives that form an individual’s religious or nonreligious identity. Without exploring the person beyond their fleeting ‘visitor’ identity, an accurate picture of how the individual engages with objects from their religion (or other religions) would be unobtainable. Roman R. Williams (2010: 272), in describing the role of the environment within people’s religious lives, stated:

In order to understand the role of place in constructing space for God, it is important to read the physical clues found in workplaces, homes, and the outdoors. Over time people make their mark on everyday environments, leaving evidence of their behaviors, identities, and feelings... Traces of practice (or intended practice) serve as cues that help structure future behavior and they stand as reminders.

Unlike homes where space is personalised, museums generally erase the evidence of visitors’ behaviours within galleries through daily cleaning.<sup>36</sup> Hence the physical clues of practice are

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<sup>36</sup> Occasionally, museums display evidence of visits such as visitor books and community group displays.

difficult to identify within the museum. However, visitors can take elements (such as souvenirs and memories) from their museum experience into their personal spaces. Visitors also bring thoughts and *things* from other locations into the museum (from religious jewellery to past experiences of prayer). It is therefore vital that other contexts beyond the gallery walls are explored in order to establish the role museum objects play in visitors' religious and nonreligious lives. The significance of the museum in its material form, but also as an institution, is integral to the understanding of how visitors experience the displayed objects. While some exhibitions try to recreate the religious settings from which their objects derive, others make a concerted effort not to produce a pseudo-religious space. This adds another dimension to the study of space and practice. From the object-lined galleries to the foyer and shop; each location within the museum aims to invite different intellectual, emotional and physical visitor responses. It is therefore an assemblage of factors, which include people, spaces, objects and the institution, that creates the conditions conducive to particular experiences.

## **Social acts**

In *Lived Religion*, McGuire (2008) refers to the 'intersubjective reality' in her analysis of everyday religious experiences, which functions through individuals' collective consciousnesses (Lewis 2008). The examination of collective beliefs and practices relates to research on communities of practice, which can exist in a multitude of temporal and permanent guises. Individuals can be members of multiple communities, which may include family, a department at work and even an event at a museum. All of these communities of practice inform how individuals make sense of their daily lives. Within the study of material religion, it is therefore vital to examine the nature of people's social networks and not just the subjectivities of isolated individuals. Thus, it may be more appropriate to consider visitors' intersubjectivities. Studying subjectivities involves a phenomenological approach to identify the ways beliefs, feelings and desires shape behaviour and vice versa. This involves not only examining the subjectivities of the participants but also of the researcher (Waardenburg 1978) as they will also have an impact.

In explaining how people engage with transcendent forms, Birgit Meyer (2010) argues that "sensations of the divine do not happen out of the blue but require the existence of a particular shared religious aesthetic". Meyer (2009) conceives religion as a practice of mediation between humans and the divine. Religious mediations depend on the circulation and repetition of what Meyer (2010b) calls 'sensational forms' that "tune the senses and allow for personal religious experience to occur". Using wordplay, she describes her definition of 'formations' as referring to the process of *forming* a community and the *performative*, or

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Although, such displays are often situated in designated areas.

dynamic, character of aesthetic sensations. Through this shared aesthetic, sensations become “sense-able”. This mediated process often renders the media employed invisible and so the sensation experienced feels immediate and direct (2010b). We must not, however, underestimate the influence of objects’ physicality. Writing about Islamic radio, Brian Larkin (2009: 118) states that “to be transmitted to subjects, religious ideas and philosophies must be encoded in material signs and when they do so they become hostage to materiality of those signs”. For Islamic radio, the recordings not only change the sound of the voice, but the nature of how, where and with whom the Qur’anic verses are experienced. Sensational forms provide religious content with shape, norms and recognisable identities. By focusing on media one can analyse how ideas and practices are (or fail to be) communicated and accepted. Thus, mediation plays an essential part in the study of material religion for understanding how intangible experiences are mediated in the material world.

The notion of the intangible and the unseen become surprisingly complex within the study of material religion. What appears invisible to one person may not be to the next. David Morgan (2005: 3) coined the idea of the ‘sacred gaze’ which, according to the author “designates the particular configuration of ideas, attitudes, and customs that inform a religious act of seeing as it occurs within a given cultural and historical setting”. For Morgan, seeing is a habituated process. Sacred gazes, he explains, refer to ways of seeing which determine what is visible and what is concealed. Morgan (2012) identifies eight different types of sacred gazes, from the *aversive gaze* which describes the act of looking away or around devotional images to the embodied performance of the *devotional gaze* which sees the devotee directly address the divine being. Seeing and not seeing are considered visual practices, which allows Morgan to explain why some people misunderstand, demonise or dismiss devotional images. Morgan’s interest in visual and material culture is, thus, less to do with the materials themselves than their role in the social and cultural construction of reality. He describes the ‘sacred gaze’ as a social act of looking, which consists of “a viewer, fellow viewers, the subject of their viewing, the context or setting of the subject, and the rules that govern the relationship between viewers and subjects” (2005: 3). These rules may include protocols such as visibility (as in who sees who), and so demand certain responses, be it physical, emotional or cognitive. Eventually these protocols come to define the ritual. Morgan’s conception of the sacred gaze provides a way to comprehend how particular experiences manifest and how people make sense of such experiences. A gaze is both constructive and selective but also discriminatory (Morgan, 2005). This is explained within Morgan’s rules of the sacred gaze which determine the viewers’ expectations and the conditions of the divine encounter. Thus the sacred gaze requires a conviction to suspend disbelief. The notion of the sacred gaze(s) enables one to consider this form of engagement in a variety of social and material environments. However, according to Morgan (2012: 102), the way one experiences religious objects in museums is notably restricted:

Prohibited from touching the object and constrained to admire it within the bounds of civil decorum, with hushed consideration of its self-contained completeness, mounted on a pedestal and lit for maximum visibility, shorn of original context, location, and use, the viewer is compelled to regard the object as if it were made for such ahistorical, rarified contemplation.

Morgan proposes that the museum institution evokes a certain type of gaze which is determined by the mode of display, inability to touch and the agendas of the institution. Here it is not the object that elicits a particular response but its setting. Such a deterministic stance denies the object and the visitor the ability to connect in other ways. This description of the object as severed from its original (material/devotional) context recalls the Enlightened/Protestant-ways of seeing as discussed in the previous chapter.

Studies into the acts of looking must also include acts of *not* looking and *not* seeing and, therefore, account for instances when individuals do not experience the divine. If an individual does not know the conventions between the viewer and the object then the divine experience may not be available or accessible. For the same reason, if a person has toothache but is unfamiliar with the concept of a dentist, having lived in a community where no such occupation exists, they will not call for a dentist nor will they know what to expect from a dentist/patient relationship. This knowledge is learnt through direct experience and indirectly through the shared experiences of others. People who encounter sacred objects from a community for which they are not a part will have decidedly different encounters. These encounters will be shaped by their knowledge about the objects' religious context and the compatibility of their own religious practices and understanding, if any. This conviction is a commitment which takes practice; building a relationship with the sacred manifestations over time within a community that shares the same sacred referents. And the divine and supernatural beings are not separate or outside of the community, but within. In writing about communities, Asamoah-Gyadu (2010: 57) states that religious social groups include "the living and the transcendent ancestor who may be physically dead but remains an active participant in the religious life of the community". Divine and supernatural presences are therefore social agents within these groups as beings that can do things and have things done to them, like any other member of the group.

### **Inclusion and exclusion**

Within the wider literature on material religion, material culture is understood to include the tangible and intangible, the domestic and non-domestic, and the man-made and the natural. Then there is the study of non-material culture, which examines concepts and processes. All real-life experiences consist of material and non-material forms and so it would be meaningless to differentiate between material and non-material interactions. We can therefore deduce that the study of material religion is inclusive. But what should not be

studied in material religion? If, for example, I should embark on a study of objects within a cathedral, what objects should be and should not be considered? Tomoko Masuzawa (2005) touches on this issue in her book *The Invention of World Religions*. v (2005: 20) argues that European academics, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, constructed the category 'world religions', and by doing so faced the question of what is religion. This led to the common assumption that "any broadly value-orientating, ethically inflected viewpoint must derive from a religious heritage". Masuzawa's argument, situated within a post-colonial and orientalist discourse, demonstrates that the creation of a category (or a field of study) not only underscores the issue of inclusion/exclusion but creates the distinctions. This is evident in the evolutionary-ordered museum displays of 'world religion' during the Enlightenment period, which used the distinctions to exhibit similarities but, above all, differences. The comparison of cultures formed a hierarchy whereby some religions were regarded as more civilised and legitimate than others.

Academic subjects construct typologies and demarcations. The study of material religion is a response to such disciplinary divisions. However, material religion should not be treated as an adjective for describing things (as observed in the case of material culture in material culture studies) but a way of rendering what and how people practise and perform their religious lives. It would therefore be misleading to question what is or is not material religion in the (aforementioned) cathedral, as there is no material phenomenon that is material religion besides the study of it. And so the question of what to include and exclude at the cathedral is dependent on the actions and perceptions of the people who visit and work in the building (past, present and future). For example, a cathedral contains a multitude of objects, from candles to the caretaker's broom. In interviewing the cathedral's staff, the caretaker may reveal that sweeping the altar is an affecting experience. This illustrates the interplay of four components: the person, the object, the deity and the context. Only collectively and contextually can they be addressed within the study of material religion. However, as Masuzawa suggests concerning the 19<sup>th</sup> century academics, there is an inherent risk that the researchers may, through studying behaviours and the objects themselves, prescribe objects as having a religious or sacred quality by merely identifying their presence within a particular setting. Furthermore, there are instances – common in religion – where classification is unable to describe a phenomenon in a concise and comprehensible manner. In asking "what objects are sacred?" members of a community may disagree or not understand, the distinction between the sacred and profane may be blurred (or no such distinction exists), or the sacred quality may be temporal. And so the process of categorising and defining becomes complex and often confusing, especially if the distinctions do not translate between cultures. The notion of 'sacred', in regard to religious practices with material forms, needs readdressing to respond to these issues.

## Sacred properties

The 'sacred' is most commonly defined in opposition to what is profane. Yet, the borders between what is and is not deemed sacred can be highly porous or non-existent. Nancy T. Ammerman (2003: 222) attests that "no interaction is utterly secular or utterly sacred". Yet, this statement can also be contested for being too determinate. Is it impossible for an interaction to be utterly sacred? Surely the answer depends on the community's understanding of sacred. In discussing the sacred/profane relationship, Sven Haakanson, Jr (2004: 123) explains the dilemma he faces as a museum director and a member of a Native American community: "We are asked to define the sacred elements of our society. Yet how can we do this when everything around us is sacred?".<sup>37</sup> Haakanson also describes the difficulties in interpreting new ideas of sacred with traditional concepts. This is a significant issue for museums where objects associated with a sacred ritual can be perceived as timeless. The question of what is sacred is not only for academics and museum staff. In the USA it is a federal matter. The Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), passed in 1990, defines sacred objects as "specific ceremonial objects which are needed by traditional Native American religious leaders for the practice of traditional Native American religions by their present day adherents" (NPS, 2008). This definition, when used to justify a case for repatriation, can be a highly contentious matter for both the indigenous tribes and the museum staff.

According to David Morgan (2005), objects and images operate through organising spaces of worship by delineating places as sacred and profane. This description touches on Emile Durkheim's (1915) definition of the sacred as something that is set apart and forbidden. For Peter Berger (1967: 26), the sacred had a dichotomous quality which was both "other than man and yet related to him". Mircea Eliade (1959: 12) came to a similar paradox: "By manifesting the sacred, any object becomes *something else*, yet it continues to remain *itself*, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu" [original emphasis]. However, the blurred and shifting nature of the sacred, as described, appears at odds with such oppositional definitions. In practice, the 'sacred' attribute is far too complex and fuzzy to be explained by what it is not. Conceiving the sacred and the profane as two mutually exclusive categories fails to account for the ways things, spaces and people are able to embody different degrees of both states at different times. And so, instead of seeing the sacred and profane as oppositional and absolute, the terms require a fluidity, which recognises the potential for more nuanced understandings of how such qualities come about. I therefore suggest a different way to conceive what is sacred. If we understand religion to be mediated,

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<sup>37</sup> This sentiment evokes David Chidester and Edward Tabor Linenthal's (1995: 11) writings on the profane body and sacred space. In it he quotes a Ch'an master: "Since the Dharmakaya [the Buddha essence] fills all space... where in the entire universe can I find a place to shit?".

as Meyer proposed, then it is through the materials' involvement in the mediation process that 'things' are experienced as sacred. By designating an object as sacred, the link between the material world we live in and the divine is acknowledged. In other words, it is not the object that is sacred, but the practice with the object. The practice must therefore involve the devotee, the object, a space for the interaction to take place and the supernatural being (be it God, an ancestor or other). Collectively these components create, what can be called, a 'sacred engagement'. Through continued and communicated practice, the object may appear to represent the divine and the embodiment of what is religious and holy and, as a consequence, become known as a sacred object. A sacred object, in this sense, is not a synonym for a 'religious object'. Rather, it refers to a specific role that objects play in divine/supernatural connections. Moreover, this sacred quality is not static, but part of a dynamic field which emerges in particular contexts and is dependent upon many different factors. The sacred is, therefore, a specific state of *being*. If we continue with this interpretation, we no longer see the profane as "desecrating what is sacred", as it is historically defined (Oxford Dictionary 2009), nor is the profane a residual category for everything that is not sacred. Instead the profane is a state in which an interaction does not engage with a divine or supernatural entity. While the term 'sacred' can be used to refer to a number of qualities in both religious and nonreligious contexts, my conception of sacred is purposefully specific in order to identify a particular form of engagement. The sacred state, therefore, describes when a non-human actor is engaged within a practice involving a 'supernatural' being and a human being. This link may be temporal or permanent, individual or communal. In other words, it is dependent on whom and what is engaging.

## **Museums and the study of material religion**

Museums are frequently referred to within the field of material religion studies. The *Journal of Material Religion*, for example, provides regular articles on museum exhibitions. However, the majority of these articles are reviews and provide little critical reflection or empirical data. Visitors are mentioned usually in a general sense (as a collective audience) or, otherwise, anecdotally from secondary sources (via the curators, blogs or reviews). The articles' focal points are the exhibition or the museum itself and not the visitor. Thus, little research exists that explore the subjectivities of museum visitors in relation to the sacred objects they encounter.<sup>38</sup> However, museum reviews in *Material Religion* frequently provide notable insights into the nature of displaying religious artefacts and the performance and practice of religion in public spaces. Curators and exhibitors are often highly reflexive about the role of the museum and the response they want from the public. In a review of an exhibition of Himalayan artworks, Gregory Price Grieve (2006: 131) reveals the curator's concerted effort not to produce a pseudo-religious space.

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<sup>38</sup> Exceptions include Chin (2010), Da Silva (2010), Nightingale and Greene (2010), and Nixon (2012).

According to the opening curator, Rob Linrothe, the RMA [Rubin Museum of Art] did all it could to avoid creating a “faux Tibetan temple... We need to communicate that this is not a Buddhist Museum or a Tibetan Museum, it is an art museum”.

Linrothe’s comment highlights the centrality of the curator’s role within visitors’ experiences of sacred objects. However, one should not assign too much power to the actions and intentions of human participants. The curator of the Rubin Museum of Art (New York) may have wanted to avoid a quasi-religious experience, but objects have the tendency to invite responses that the museum staff do not foresee. On occasion, simply making the objects accessible and visible is sufficient in creating the conditions conducive to a devotional experience. Irrespective of the manner in which the exhibits are engaged, each encounter between an object and visitor involves a myriad of social networks, which may include the curators, the museum staff, the object lenders, the security personnel, the funders, other visitors and so on. All these networks can have an impact, on some level, on the visitor experience. The interactions within these networks provide engagements that are unique to the museum. And so, unlike the majority of research within the study of material religion (which usually focuses on religious communities, objects and/or spaces), the study of religion in museums must account for many other communities, all of which experience the museum and objects differently.

A fundamental question, when approaching the study of material religion in museums, concerns how the relationship between visitors and objects changes when artefacts move from religious sites to a gallery. An artefact’s relocation from a place of worship to a museum mirrors the embracing of new media within religious practices, which transforms the nature of how different audiences encounter religious content. In his analysis of Islamic audio recordings, Larkin (2009: 118) explored the impact of changing the context from public (broadcast) to private (recorded media):

When public recitation became privatized reading, for instance, the change in the medium of the religious communication entailed changes in sociability, in ideas of presence and reference, in experiences of exteriority and interiority.

Similarly, how communities form and interact with each other and the divine also change when media goes from private to public. Studies into the mediation of religion, as Larkin illustrates, often reveal the influential role of the mediating technology, as well as the effects of where the technology is accessed and with whom. The shift from private to public, as in the display of objects from places of worship, is a common occurrence in museums. The museum location also changes the nature of the social networks that engage with these objects, which may give rise to new opportunities for sacred encounters.

In summary, the study of material religion brings together multiple entities within a circuit that connects the material world to the immaterial world, and people to objects. Within this

framework, interactions with objects give rise to sacred engagements. These experiences therefore incorporate people, divine beings and material forms, and so are therefore hybrids of both human and non-human entities. This is a radically different way of considering objects and supernatural beings within the social sciences. Difficulty in comprehending something that is both human and non-human again demonstrates another example of the purification process. Neither museum visitor studies nor material religion are able to account for the complex ways in which the sacred quality is experienced through objects in pluralist spaces which are traditionally viewed as non-devotional. In order to address the matter of agency in museum engagements, I will consider the roles objects and divine/spiritual beings play in visitor-object encounters as active and participating entities within visitors' experiences. Continuing with the notion that people, objects and divine beings are connected, I will also introduce the concept of 'actor networks', as described within Actor Network Theory, as a way to understand the heterogeneous and interdependent nature of sacred engagements in museums.

## Objects and agency

Museum visitor studies, as described, lack theoretical understandings of religious engagements, whilst, within the study of material religion, there is little empirical research into public cultural spaces of religiously-pluralist societies. So how do we account for the range of experiences between visitors, museum objects and divine and supernatural presences? Seeing museum objects as part of religious practices, and as potential sites for a divine/supernatural presence, involves a reconsideration of how people and objects interact and interrelate.

Objects are described, more frequently in the study of museums than of religion, to have biographies (Appadurai 1986 and Gosden 2001). These biographies often focus on the objects' makers, where and how they travelled, and with who and what came into contact with them. Constructivist theories, which inform the majority of museum studies, state that objects do not tell their own stories (Gosden 2001). Stories (or, rather, meaning) are, instead, conceived as constructed within a negotiated process between the museum and the visitor. However, within some cultures and communities, sacred objects *do* communicate. For Nicholas Thomas (2001), in *Beyond Aesthetics*, 'doing' is theorised as agency. The notion of agency carries with it associations of activity and life. Yet perceptions that objects are inactive and lifeless suggest that objects do not possess agency. Such understandings create a binary between humans (as those that possess agency) and everything else that does not.

In a comparison of museums and cemeteries, Morgan Meyer and Kate Woodthorpe (2008: 9) conclude that objects in museums are 'dead' in the sense that they are "cultural and inanimate objects" whilst objects placed on graves are "more 'alive'". "In a cemetery", they state "objects are inscribed with personal meanings and memories, and visitors are allowed to

touch them and care about them". Such physical and emotional connections, they say, are not possible in museums. Sharon Macdonald (2002) describes an equally common impression of museums:

Museums bestow such sanctity. They also anchor or stabilize objects; they remove them from their daily use and transaction. A museum, for most objects, is a final resting place – a moment frozen in time for future contemplation.

Do museum institutions hold such power that they are capable of petrifying its contents? Macdonald's description avoids the violence of death, and instead portrays the process as a gentle submission to retirement. Either way, the museum object is left lifeless. Reflecting on the practice of museums, Theodor Adorno (1981: 173) pondered on the negative connotations of the German word for museum-like, 'museal'. "It describes objects", Adorno declared, "to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying". According to Adorno, the fatal blow to this relationship is the object's placement within the museum, which took the object away from its original context and thus terminated the object's relationship with people.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Jean Baudrillard (1983: 21) employed the term museumification to describe how Ancient Egyptian mummies 'die' "from being transplanted... to an order of history, science, and museums". This order, he proclaims, "only knows how to condemn its predecessors to death and putrescence and their subsequent resuscitation by science". These perceptions, argues Andrea Witcomb (2003: 105), are "firmly linked to the idea that museums enclose objects, separating them from the life-forces which gave their original social and political meanings". Such descriptions not only indicate a process of purification, in the separation of humans and non-humans, but also a mixing of the two. The suggestion that museum objects are dead and silenced implies that objects were once alive and able to communicate.

## The role of agency

The study of sacred engagements in museums requires a redefinition of the term agency in order to account for the ways that objects shape and are shaped by their participation in visitor-interactions. 'Agency' is commonly understood to be a human attribute which describes result-orientated actions or, to quote the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Oxford Dictionary (2009), "working as a means to an end". According to psychologist Albert Bandura (2001: 2) the concept of agency is situated within the field of social cognitive theory and the dynamics of causality. Bandura argued that agency is outcome-focused and that agents "intentionally make things happen by one's actions" (2001: 2). Moreover, "people are not just onlooking

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<sup>39</sup> The mid-eighteenth century *Cyclopaedia, Or an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Science* (Chambers 1743) defined the museum as "any place *set apart* as a repository for things" [emphasis added]. This definition, again, portrayed the museum as separated from everyday practices.

hosts of internal mechanisms orchestrated by environmental events. They are agents of experiences rather than simply undergoers of experiences” (2001: 4). Bandura’s defining features of agency relegates material ‘things’ as mere receptors of and spectators to the actions of humans. But such a definition dismisses the ways non-human entities are embroiled in activities. Material objects, as philosopher of technology Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005: 235) proposes, “codetermine how human beings experience their world and how their existence unfolds in it”. If objects are co-shapers of action then we must consider objects as agents of experiences. To do this, we need to step away from psychological explanations of agency and its dictionary definitions, and look to theories within sociology and anthropology. Social anthropologist Alfred Gell and sociologist Bruno Latour locate agency at the centre of their theories which recognise the role of materiality in social structures. Although coming from different perspectives – in Gell’s case art and for Latour, technology – both scholars arrive at social networks that incorporate humans and non-humans.

In an attempt to recognise the agency of objects, Gell (1998) proposes that human agents distribute agency to ‘things’ by incorporating them into actions. He (1998: 19) introduces his theory of agency by distinguishing between two types of causal events; physical causation, what ‘things’ do, and agency which is “exercised by sentient, encultured, human beings”. He proposes that as ‘things’ cannot exercise will nor have intentions, they cannot express agency. Instead ‘things’ can become ‘social’ or secondary agents. In this process, humans distribute agency by incorporating things in the act itself. The social agent can, in fact, be anything as long as there is a human agent “in the neighbourhood” (1998: 123). Verbeek (2005: 217) continues on this point, stating that ‘things’ do not have intentions and so should not be held to account for what they do, but as they play a mediating role in our moral choices they are part of the “moral community”. And so, objects and the environment are part of how people make choices, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Marshall McLuhan (1994) also considers the agency of non-humans in his theory of media, claiming that technology acts upon humans by ‘extending’ their abilities to act. He explains:

the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology (1994: 7).

McLuhan credits media (technology) as radically changing human consciousness, social relations and our physical selves. He also applies his theory to art, which he describes as “an extension of human awareness in contrived and conventional patterns” (1994: 241). At the crux of McLuhan’s theory is the transformative effect the medium has on the ways in which people live their lives. However, by conceiving this process as ‘extensions of man’, the human is always privileged.

## Actor Network Theory

The term, Actor Network Theory (ANT), was coined by Michel Callon in the early 1980s (Law 2007) and, like the networks it describes, the descriptions and definitions of ANT are continually evolving. John Law (2007: 2) defines ANT as an approach which “describes the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors”, and these actors can be anything including humans, objects, concepts and even more networks. Law (2007) names ANT as the empirical counterpart to post-structuralism as both ANT and post-structuralism are concerned with heterogeneous networks, the relations between actors and how they are produced and translated. Whereas structuralism sought to identify the universal structures underlying culture, generally perceived as in opposition to each other; post-structuralism seeks to deconstruct these hierarchical orders of binary opposites (Belsey 2002). Post-structuralism is, therefore, both a development and a critique of structuralism and rejects many of the structuralists’ key ideas, including the centrality of the author within the text and the singularity of meaning. Moreover, it considers meanings as multiple and frequently contradictory. Nevertheless, the majority of post-structuralist studies have continued to ‘read’ people, aspects of culture and objects as texts, thereby denying and overlooking the materiality of these entities. Post-structuralism was, therefore, transforming “bodies into discourse and corporeality into textuality” (Tinning 2004: 234 in Fleckenstein, 1999: 282). ANT provides a different approach to studying relations by drawing attention to the materiality of actors and the ways their material qualities affect how they act and are enacted on. Furthermore, ANT is not interested in determining the source of action. Rather, it provides a framework to describe how actions are distributed across various material and immaterial entities, while retaining the autonomy of each actor.

A key contributor to ANT is French sociologist Bruno Latour. On his many revisits to ANT, often in response to his critics (including himself), Latour (1998) stresses that ANT is not a social theory to explain relations or causality, but a toolkit and “network-tracing activity”. Latour states that to trace a network, researchers must follow the attribution, distribution, connection and transformation of human and non-human entities as actors can be anything as long as they are the site of an action. However, unlike Gell, Latour views humans and non-humans as equally embroiled in the emergence of agency. In his paper ‘Can the Thing Speak?’, Martin Holbraad (2011) argues that Latour and ANT do not free ‘things’ from enslavement. Instead, ANT redefines what humans and things are and ‘re-distributes’ their properties. Thus, agency is not an inherent or emergent quality within the actor, but “a property of networks of relationships... that emerges as and when the elements they involve make a difference to each other” (Holbraad 2011: 7). ANT also employs its own form of methodological agnosticism and prohibits the forming of assumptions about the nature of the networks or the accuracy of the actors and their conditions (Ritzer 2008). The method is therefore well suited to the study of religion. And so, ANT cannot be used to explain whether a deity or supernatural being exists. It

can only illustrate how actors within networks relate to and interact with each other. The agnosticism of ANT differs substantially to the methodological atheist approach, which seeks to discount the existence of God by claiming that divine and supernatural beings are socially and culturally constructed (Porpora 2006). The atheist approach also discounts the fact that God is an autonomous agent. The agnostic approach, by contrast, does not turn a blind eye to the questions around proof and existence. Instead existence comes about through the spiritual beings' participation in material, social and conceptual practices. Such activities may constitute both religious and nonreligious experiences. And so, rationalist critique, understood within ANT, does not render spirits unreal: it adds to the connections that bring the spirit into being. Latour attributes the switch from a devotional form of interaction to a detached and rationalist engagement as a consequence of scholarly critique. He (2013) states:

a feedback loop connecting people assembled by their deities and assembling deities invoked by their people cannot resist too long the corroding influence of critique. The slightest distance or indifference is enough to reduce the deities to decorative themes for paintings, poems and operas. This is what has happened to the immortals [sic] gods of Antiquity: they are gone with the people who had them and who were held by them.

Critique can, therefore, play a part in dismissing and disregarding the significant roles divine and supernatural actors constitute within people's lives. Latour describes the networks in which deities operate in as particularly fragile, thereby suggesting that divine entities cannot withstand the scrutiny of scholarly analysis. However, within ANT all entities should – in theory – stand up to scrutiny if other actors are affected by the deities.

The assembly of actors with interconnected networks has drawn some criticism. Tim Ingold (2010: 3) proposes that instead of networks of heterogeneous units, we should envisage a meshwork of threads. He states:

the pathways or trajectories along which improvisatory practice unfolds are not connections, nor do they describe relations *between* one thing and another. They are rather lines *along* which things continually come into being.

Ingold explains that, unlike a network that is made up of autonomous human and non-human entities, a 'meshwork' is an entwinement of growing threads that are not connected to each other but are part of the same whole. In his description of this ever-expanding entwinement of lines, he likens the structure to Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome (2004). Ingold's understanding of extensions shares similarities with Gell's notion of 'secondary agency' and McLuhan's 'extensions of man'. However, Ingold is not interested in determining whether the source of agency is human or non-human or if agency is located in the connections between actors. Instead, Ingold (2010: 21) states that if "these lines are relations, then they are

relations not *between* but *along*".<sup>40</sup> Thus, movement or action comes out of 'things' in a process of continual transformations. However, in the task of researching these networks, it is also useful to maintain the autonomy of the actors, thereby enabling one to trace their transformations as they become entangled within changing networks. And although actors may lie at the heart of ANT, Latour suggests that the actor may be understood better using the term 'mediator', as mediation evokes a process by which action moves and is transformed throughout the network. Furthermore, ANT is not an attempt to explain how society works. Rather, it is a method for looking at activities or, in Latour's (1998: 11) words, a "recorded movement of a thing". ANT, therefore, provides the potential of bringing attention to entities within the network that might otherwise be missed.

### Supernatural actors

In *Art and Agency*, Gell (1998) considers the role of agency in idolatry. Arguing that an idol is neither a machine nor a person, he denies the idol the ability to act as it is "only the *target* of agency, never the independent source". Thus, the idol (like a child's doll) is merely a manifestation of human agency or, more specifically, of human imagination. Although it may appear that these inanimate idols do nothing, Gell states that they are 'active'. Their actions are not manifested physically, but take place in other ways and in other places. In response to this idea, Daniel Miller (2005: 36) asserts that Gell's agency theory only grants agency for 'things' "as a matter of inference not as an inherent property of objects themselves". By considering the idol as a secondary agent and treating the idol as a social construct, Gell fails to recognise a form of agency that does not derive from humans. In this sense, Gell continues to erect a division between non-humans (secondary agents) and humans (the primary and actual source of agency). To consider the agency of objects as more than manifestations of human imagination, the divisions which separate humans and non-humans must be discarded.

Like inanimate 'things', supernatural actors are subject to the same accusations that refute their abilities to act. Such denials usually centre on the matter of existence and intentionality. While not specifically addressing supernatural/divine actors, Latour attends to these issues in relation to the broader category of non-humans. On existence, Latour (1999b: 192) states that "[t]here is no sense in which humans may be said to exist as humans without entering into commerce with what authorises and enables them to exist (that is, to act)." Existence, according to Latour, is a relational and interdependent process. In this sense, deities and other supernatural actors are also brought about (and authorised) by their interactions with other entities. As for intentionality, Latour (1999b: 192) poses:

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<sup>40</sup> Latour does not say that non-human and human actors have agency, but that agency is the result of these actors coming together.

Purposeful action and intentionality may not be the properties of objects, but they are not properties of humans either. They are properties of institutions... Only corporate bodies are able to absorb the proliferation of mediators, to regulate their expression, to redistribute skills, to force boxes to blacken and close.

Latour attributes the efficacy of actors to act intentionally to the larger network, and yet the success and stability of the network masks these components (or, to use Latour's term, 'blackboxes' them<sup>41</sup>). By way of illustrating this point, Latour (1999: 193) declared that "Boeing 747s do not fly, airlines fly". For commercial airliners to fly it takes schedules, flight paths, legislation, engineers, engines, crew, and so on. Within these networks are decisions, opportunities, conflicts and limitations. Intentionality and purpose is not the product of one actor, but an assemblage of negotiations between humans and non-humans and the material and immaterial. For the divine to be an active component within lived experiences, we must recognise that the notion of action is distributed across networks. And it is here that we should extend Latour's corporate bodies to other institutions – both religious and that of museums (and, at times, a combination thereof). Places of worship, religious leaders, government bodies, communities and texts constitute the assemblages, that authorise certain actors. It is, therefore, in these networks of interaction that actors become knowable.

In the article, *Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism?*, Jon Bialecki (2014: 16) argues that God is able to act as an autonomous agent whether there is a belief in the deity's existence or not. He explains:

even if God were to be nothing other than a phantasm, a phantasm is at least an object, and therefore must be given the dignity of being seen as such; it must be conceived as being equivalent to all other objects in its potentiality of both affecting and being affected by all other objects, human and otherwise, that it becomes entwined with.

Bialecki, together with Latour's understanding of non-humans, illustrate how supernatural actors possess the capacity to affect humans, and so should not be perceived as mere projections of the believer. Interactions with God, for example, require the devotee and the divine to act. Thus, the deity's actions are not an extension of the devotee (as McLuhan may deduce), or a parasitic agent (as Gell stated). The deity acts both independent of, and implicated with, people in the same way that the actions of people come about through their entanglements with multiple non-human actors within the material world.

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<sup>41</sup> 'Blackboxing' refers to a process whereby actors and their actions become so taken-for-granted within a process that the individual components are rendered invisible (Latour 1999b).

## Performance: making connections

Central to ANT is mediation. In ANT every actor is a mediator and every act of mediation is transformative, as “without transformations or translations no vehicles can transport any effect” (Latour 2005: 214). Latour (2001: 19) demonstrates this idea in his description of religious ceremonies:

The logic of the processions does not progress, except in intensity; it is afraid of innovation even though it continually keeps on inventing; it endeavors not to repeat tediousness, even though it continually keeps on repeating the same rituals... It likes to make the message more precise, but this sets in motion, each time, councils, sessions of tribunals, congregations, that accumulate still more points of doctrine, theology, and canonical law, and complicate even further the movement of the message.

As this description illustrates, a religious institution may appear to be static and resistant to change but, on closer inspection, there is constant activity involving multiple (acknowledged and unacknowledged) mediators. For a ceremony to continue to exist, it has to be practised, performed and kept alive in the consciousness of the community. Birgit Meyer’s notion of mediators (within material religion studies) also requires practice to ensure its efficacy and survival. Mediation is, therefore, a constant process which maintains and restores connections, whereby “associations shift constantly in both tiny and revolutionary ways” (Harman 2009: 80). Moreover, action keeps networks together and enables researchers to observe what is going on. These are our tracks to follow or as Latour (1998: 128) declares: “If the social is a trace, then it can be retraced; if it’s an assembly then it can be reassembled”. ANT, therefore, provides a method that attends to the detail by reconstructing events in order to understand how they are formed, what is involved and in what ways the actors within the networks are enacting and being enacted upon.

The term ‘network’ can be misleading. A network suggests a plotted structure which extends itself over an area. For ANT, distance is a far more fluid concept. According to Latour (2005: 174), the network abandons “the tyranny of distance”. Latour (2005: 181) refers to this understanding of proximity within the network as “flattening the landscape”, explaining that “in such a flattened topography, if any action has to be transported from one site to the next, you now clearly need a conduit and a vehicle” (2005: 174). And so, like a telephone, a conduit can bring together physically remote elements within an interaction. This idea of overcoming the obstacles of distance is especially relevant to religion and the notion of transcendental experience. Objects within rituals are often understood to act as conduits to divine beings, in order to make the divine present within the interaction. And so, within a religious performance distance between, for example, earth and heaven, contracts. In *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*, Latour (2010: 48) suggests such an approach to the divine:

Once the divinities have been seated in existence, let us add to the specifications list the requirement that we be able to refer to them in precise and exact language without using any of the scenographies of exoticism, and without needing to believe that they have come from another world, different from our own...

Latour's call to anchor the divine within everyday lived practices enables one to acknowledge supernatural entities as active elements within interactions. This not only brings supernatural entities into being, it also brings them into contact with other (non-supernatural) actors. Latour's (1996: 4-5) writings on geographic distance, again, help to explain this convergence of actors:

elements which would appear as infinitely distant may be close when their connections are brought back into the picture... The notion of network helps us to lift the tyranny of geographers in defining space and offers us a notion which is neither social nor "real" space, but simply associations.

In the context of studying religious practices, there are two senses of overcoming distance; firstly, in terms of how one interprets the relationship between the divine and the devotee, and secondly, in terms of how actors are connected within the actor networks. In both contexts, the networks break down the distinctions between what is transcendental and what is earthly by entwining the divine and supernatural actors in activities within the material world.

Overcoming distance is pivotal for interactions involving sacred objects (in particular, for conduits to the divine). Writing about idolatry, Gell (1998: 135) stated that the "essence of idolatry is that it permits real physical interactions to take place between persons and divinities". Idolatrous materials therefore operate as mediators at a sensory level "as physical channels of access to the divinity" (1998: 135). Yet, the term 'channel' suggests a free-flow from source to recipient without modification. Mediation, for Latour, is inherently transformative. Within ANT, interactions create human-non-human hybrids. In the context of religious practices in museums this incorporates humans, objects and supernatural/divine actors and, therefore, create new actors that bind all these elements. Action arises out of these hybrids and is also what creates the bonds. Writing on Catholic rituals, Robert Orsi (2005: 75-6), stated that "[r]eligious materiality or presence... is not things but practice". Practice, therefore, plays a fundamental role in bringing these *things* together.

Let us return to the comparative study of the cemetery and museum mentioned at the start of this chapter. Meyer and Woodthorpe claimed that offerings left on graves were 'more alive' than those in museum exhibits, as objects in museums were distanced from the visitor, both physically and emotionally. However, what is missing from Meyer and Woodthorpe's description is 'who'. For whom is the object more dead or more alive? For the relative who visits the grave, yes, the objects would resonate more because the personal meanings and

memories restore old and create new connections between the griever and deceased. The same individual on visiting a museum is unlikely to have a personal connection to most of the objects on display. Yet, say this visitor came across a toy in a museum display case that is similar to the one that is on the child's grave. The visitor may not be able to touch the object or see it age, but would it not evoke a similar response, and therefore a comparable, or rather, connected set of associations involving the buried loved one? Here memory, emotion and the community, and possibly faith as well, intersect. No object or actor is inert. Rather, in each scenario, the non-human and human actors connect differently. And, of course, pre-existing relationships with the object will often make these connections more pertinent whether they are displayed in a cemetery or a museum.

Describing museum objects as dead and lifeless suggests that they are disconnected from visitors. However, by viewing museum objects and visitors through an ANT lens these actors (the objects and visitors) are not separated, but enmeshed within multiple assemblages. And every engagement presents a different set of actors and links that connect to memories, new information and, in some cases, to ancestors and gods. For example, a visitor to the British Museum's exhibition *Gamelan: Music of Java* (21 May – 12 July 2009), described the impact of hearing the Javanese music when viewing the instruments:

You've got this thing in a case and it just sits there dead. But if you've actually got it playing [music] ... that enhances your sense that you've actually experienced something about it rather than it just being dead in a box (British Museum 2009).

This visitor's encounter with the object was transformed by the presence of the music. For this visitor, the soundtrack reanimated the object, awakening it from its stupor. Over the past twenty years, museum studies have viewed media, such as music and interactive learning aids, as the 'life-giving' power static objects needed to connect to visitors. However, the music was not reawakening the object but providing more relations to connect the actors, which created a stronger connection. ANT understands that all actors are active elements in the network as all actors can act and be enacted on. We can therefore reject the analogies of the object as dead, frozen and silent. To pronounce the object as frozen/dead, the observer is turning a blind eye to the active network-in-motion, and the possibilities they provide for forging and facilitating new connections.

## **Materiality and place**

The material properties of humans and 'things' affect the way they interact as they are subject to the same physical forces. For example, a sculptor working with wood must work *with* the wood, with its knots and its grain. Within this physical interplay, the materials are manipulated by the maker, and in turn, the materials manipulate the maker. Writing about the agency of materials, Ingold (2009) argues that material substances are not passive entities as they *give*

*rise to form*. In respect to religious practice, material properties can also give rise to devotional experiences. Interpreting villagers' rituals with images of deities, Christopher Pinney (2001: 167) stated that embodied rituals transform "pieces of paper into powerful deities through the devotee's gaze". As a result, these paper images "bear traces of these activities in their form, and in some cases prescribe the process of viewing itself". Evidence of past interactions with the paper thereby inform subsequent interactions between the image, devotee and deity. The lineage of actions between devotee and image is, therefore, materially manifested in the paper. Pinney (2004), drawing on phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'double sensation', also proposes that in such interactions, by touching one is being touched or, in the case of looking, that by seeing a deity one is seen by that deity. Gell (1998: 120) refers to this process in idolatry as a "*nested component* of 'her seeing herself seeing the idol'". Whilst Gell situates all agency in the mind of the human (as the primary seer), Pinney recognises that the agency of the deity, within this assemblage of actors, is also made present and real by the material forms.

The agency of material objects and environments is evident in more ways than we can consciously comprehend. On entering an old church, the visitor is confronted by a set of sensations which derive from memories but also from the building and its furnishings. The coolness of the stone building and the subdued sunlight seeping through the stained glass creates an ambience that sets the tone. Fictional writers use 'things' continuously to create a particular atmosphere. In Edgar Allen Poe's (1849: 291-2) short story, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the narrator demonstrates a moment of clarity when confronted by his friend's dwelling:

what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? ... I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression...

The narrator's perceptiveness of the objects' agency in this scene illustrates a fundamental principle within ANT: that every network is unique and will transform each actor in different ways. People rarely observe and articulate the impact of their material surroundings in such detail. It is only until we are asked how a place affects us that we attempt to work out what is going on. In the evaluation report for the British Museum exhibition, *Agents of the Buddha*, visitors were asked if they experienced a presence of any kind coming from the objects.<sup>42</sup> Whilst most respondents said simply 'no', those that did comment described something in the

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<sup>42</sup> The exhibition ran from 11 November 2010 to 9 January 2011.

gallery which either inhibited or heightened their experience. Most identified the lighting, music, noise levels and seating, as well as the statues themselves. The ANT approach attempts to consider all the objects in play, from the obvious elements such as the exhibits to the taken-for-granted furniture and security staff. Everything is connected and everything is potentially transformative. As well as enabling and evoking experiences, it is also important to recognise when interactions are prevented and, therefore, absent. For example, the Topkapı Palace Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, positions some of their cases against the walls in order to prevent circumambulation (the ritual of walking around sacred shrines) and, thus, experiencing what may be considered as a religious practice (Shaw 2010). The museum identifies itself as secular and arranges its exhibition furniture to guide visitors away from performing religious acts. The placement of the cases, therefore, impacts on the way people interact with the objects, irrespective of whether the visitors are conscious of this.

## Networked approaches to religion

In the *Sociology of Religious Emotion*, Linda Woodhead and Ole Riis (2007: 5) introduce a system for examining religious emotion, using similar concepts to those found in ANT. The authors propose an analysis of religious emotion “as constructed in the interplay between social agents *and* structures” and thus recognising religious emotion as “both personal and relational; private and social; biological and cultural; active and passive”. Like ‘actors’ in ANT, they explain that ‘objects’ can be a variety of entities including material forms, texts, deities and people. The authors propose that religious emotions develop when individuals connect emotionally to religious symbols within a religious community. These components are not just interacting but ‘mutually constituting’ within a framework of dialectical relations. When the components are all connected, “there is a positive feedback between consecrated symbols and collective emotions, each reinforcing the power of the other” (2010: 103). Woodhead and Riis (2010: 121) refer to this as the idealised ‘balanced regime’, which “can lack structural pressures towards innovation, reform, and adaptation to new emotional challenges, and focus more on conformity, consensus, and continuity”. This analysis reflects Latour’s portrayal of the procession and the ongoing processes of refinement and maintenance. And so, a missing element may disrupt this chain of agency. In such cases the symbol (object) may be rejected by the community. However, in ANT one can only follow relations between what is present, which creates a problem in noting what is absent.

The discounting of what is absent and hidden, warns Sharon Macdonald (2009), is a major weakness of assemblage theories such as ANT. Following only what is observable may deflect attention from what is absent and so the tracing of the network becomes embroiled in the continuation of concealing. Although, if one conceives an absence as an actor, the problem of ruptures within the network is replaced with the potential to identify what is missing and, subsequently, trace how absent entities are made known and thus connected. Absence therefore becomes central to the analysis of human-object interactions. Studies into religious

objects have predominately focused on what is present, be it 'things', knowledge or spiritual entities. The turn to practice sheds light on what is missing, concealed or unknown, which raises questions in regard to protocols concerning visibility and invisibility; the material and the immaterial; and what is accessible and inaccessible. For example, the Ethiopian holy tabots (or tablets) at the British Museum are not on display as the Orthodox Ethiopian Christian priests believe them to be too sacred. They are, therefore, kept out-of-sight in a storage room which only the priests can access. These objects may not be present in the galleries but discussions about their absence are present within the museum sector, in the media and amongst (interested) members of the public.<sup>43</sup> The influence of these absences can, for some visitors, be as affecting as what is displayed. Similarly, the tracing of sacred engagements must not only account for experiences with a divine or supernatural being but also failures to engage and connect. These absences and failures may come about through interviews and subsequent observations. The study of absence within the materiality of religion, therefore, also evokes thoughts around emotions such as desire and aversion, which, in turn, lead to questions about the development, persistence and failure of particular rituals and material forms.

Woodhead and Riis's framework provides a more prescribed network of associations than what is offered by ANT. However, by focusing on one type of activity the researchers are able to trace the necessary trajectories and explore the workings of agency within such contexts. Gordon Lynch (2010b: 51) suggests approaching agency not as "a property of specific individuals or technologies but of complex social systems in which limits, possibilities, stasis, and changes occur through cycles of interaction and feedback". Considering agency in this way acknowledges that the social networks that connect people, things, and the divine/supernatural are organic, growing in some parts and dying out in others.

Daniele Hervieu-Leger (2000: 125) uses a similar concept of interconnectedness in her examination of religious traditions in changing societies. Hervieu-Leger proposes the notion that religion can be seen as chains of memories of past and present communities. A religious group may therefore define itself as a 'lineage of belief':

At the source of all religious belief...there is belief in the continuity of the lineage of believers. This continuity transcends history. It is affirmed and manifested in the essentially religious act of recalling a past which gives meaning to the present and contains the future.

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<sup>43</sup> In an article entitled 'The censoring of our museums', Tiffany Jenkins (2005) contended that artefacts that are "hidden" away are "in effect placed in deep-freeze". This understanding of access evokes the previously discussed argument over whether objects in museums are frozen in time and thereby no longer active elements in religious rituals.

Like Woodhead and Riis' network of religious emotion, the community is central to the maintenance of beliefs, practices and traditions. Hervieu-Leger does not illustrate how these chains operate. Her descriptions of the chains are only an analogy. However, by using this image of chains, Hervieu-Leger underscores the interconnectedness of memories. Memories and forgetting (and the process of selecting and re-inventing memories) play a crucial role in people-thing relationships, and so, remembered actors (including things, people and emotions) must also be present within the traced networks. Hervieu-Leger's studies on memory also illustrate the nonlinearity of time, as many activities are either informed by the past but performed in the present or performed in the past and recollected in the present. Annemarie Mol and Marc Berg (1998: 5) propose that in networks, there are multiple times within the present. Hence, "[i]nstead of flowing forward in a linear manner... time takes the form of folds, of loops and spirals". In regard to visitor engagements, the pasts and futures of visitors, of museums and of religion are 'folded' into the actor network of each engagement. Multiple pasts, presents and futures emerge through interactions with the objects, the building, the labels and with other visitors and staff. Likewise, Enlightenment ideas and ideals (and their Protestant influences) are also evoked in varying ways. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how religion is displayed and understood is diversifying. Yet, the legacy of the Enlightenment continues on. In an interview with the curator of the British Museum's 2011 exhibition *Treasures of Heaven*, James Robinson defended the Museum's display of potentially 'fake' relics, saying: "what we are trying to do in the museum is demonstrate how these bizarre relics operated with the medieval context" (Today 2011). Although the exhibition evoked a medieval crypt and invited (to use Morgan's term) a *devoted gaze*, the curator was keen to stress the distinction between the rational and irrational, and thus distinguish between the authentic scientific fact and the 'religious fiction'. Yet, the curatorial influence should not be overstated within the networks of visitor engagements. Whether objects are presented as works of art or as illustrative of historical narratives (or both, as in the case at *Treasures of Heaven*), they still maintain the potential for sacred engagements for some visitors.

## ANT concepts

ANT provides a number of useful concepts for examining the relations between actors, such as the boundary object. Boundary objects are actors that exist within multiple networks at the same time. These objects:

inhabit several intersecting social worlds... [and] are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites (Griesemer and Star 1989: 393).

Boundary objects, as single actors that are experienced in multiple ways, provide a helpful way to picture how visitors encounter the same object or concept. For example, a bench within a gallery allows for a multitude of experiences. It can provide a space for the visitor to meditate

or pray, but it can also accommodate activities that distract the visitor away from the museum content, such as checking a smartphone. Identifying certain actors as boundary objects allows one to examine the ways the bench is implicated within different networks and to trace how these networks of interactions impact upon one another (for instance, if different visitors sit on the same bench). The boundary object, therefore, brings attention to the actor at the centre of an intersection of different networks. Although Latour (1998b) argues that the network is all boundary and nothing else, I wish to uphold this term in order to discuss actors that “exist on the interface between different communities of practice” (Larsen 2010: 170).

In the summative evaluation for the 2008 British Museum exhibition, *Church and Emperor: An Ethiopian Crucifixion* (6 March - 5 May 2008), visitors to the gallery were asked what aspects of the exhibition led them to enter the gallery, whilst people who walked straight past the entrance were asked if there was anything about the exhibition that led them to stay away (MHM 2008). The results presented a variety of responses to the exhibitions’ religious theme. One such non-attendee stated that the exhibition “was clearly religious which isn’t really my thing” whilst a visitor who entered the gallery stated that the theme “pulled me in as there was some connection [as] Ethiopians are Christians and I am a Christian too”. Thus, the same actor (or assemblage of actors) prompted an assortment of visitor responses. By recognising the role of boundary objects within networks, a refusal to engage does not have to be interpreted as an absence. Rather it is a different experience of the same actor that involves a different assemblage of mediators that cross over with many other experiences. Although all actors have the capacity to be a boundary object, the term is useful in bringing to light the ways that certain actors can facilitate different and contradictory interactions.

Another useful conception within ANT is Latour’s description of star-shaped networks. Latour (2005: 177) uses the term ‘centers of calculation’ to describe information hubs such as government offices and laboratories, which feature “a center surrounded by many radiating lines with all sorts of tiny conduits leading to and fro”. These centres, Latour proposes, form star-shaped networks that provide a new topographical relationship between the micro and macro. Ingold (2010: 21) likens this star metaphor to a spider whereby “the lives of things generally extend along not one but multiple lines, knotted together at the centre but trailing innumerable ‘loose ends’ at the periphery.” Yet, in contrast to Ingold’s trailing-off lines, Latour (2005: 204) envisions a flattened landscape of star-shaped actor networks that sit side by side “without any jump or break” and thereby form a continuous tapestry of connected star-shaped networks. Whilst Latour mostly uses the ‘star-shape’ in reference to organisations of power and information, the star-shaped network provides a useful analogy to describe relationships through decentring the obvious core actor(s). This offers the potential to trace actors (including those that may seem less significant) from different perspectives. For example, the aforementioned bench may seem incidental in visitors’ interactions. However, if one should consider the bench as the focal point, the researcher may discover that this mundane item of furniture facilitates and prevents many different experiences. This process of

re-centring particular actors and decentering others provides an alternate view of the relationships between actors, which may uncover previously overlooked associations. The star-shaped conception of the network and the boundary object, therefore, operate in similar ways by bringing out the many actors involved within interactions.

## Conclusion

Material religion studies and ANT offer a variety of concepts, theories and methods that address critical gaps within museum visitor research. Central to the study of religious experiences, as described, was the shift from belief to practice. This change in focus mirrors the move in museum studies from object-centred to visitor-centred approaches (Weil 1999). However, this change that aimed to empower the visitor as an active social agent within the museum experience came at the expense of the material object. And so, I propose that visitor studies also require a practice-centred approach that recognise the interconnected, interdependent and hybridised nature of visitors' interactions with objects.

Equally critical for studying visitor-object interactions within religious practises is the notion that both human and non-human actors constitute 'sacred engagements'. Acknowledging the active role of non-human entities (including objects and divine/supernatural entities) involves rejecting the purified (and constructivist) concepts of agency. As argued, human-object engagements in museums are shaped by many more forces than simply the intentions, motivations and actions of the museum staff and visitors. Non-human entities must be understood as exerting agency as part of assemblages of human and non-human actors. The actor-network approach makes it possible to decentre the human actors and, thereby, draw attention to the active role non-humans play in visitor-object encounters. By perceiving the visitor within this flattened ontology it is also possible to challenge and quash common perceptions that museums purify objects of their sacred attributes. Moreover, the network approach counters shortfalls within material religion studies. Work on religious mediation often centres on religious regimes, shared religious symbols, and media technologies, thereby failing to consider what other (banal) actors are involved. The process of tracing connections between actors, as outlined in ANT, offers a way to bring out seemingly less significant elements, including the more ambivalent (and absent) entities involved within interactions.

The network approach also provides a framework to understand how different times and places (both of this earth and transcendental) shape people-thing interactions. Visitors' past experiences play a significant part in their interactions, as many museum visitor studies acknowledge. Describing these interactions as associations between material and immaterial actors recognises the persistent agency of particular object encounters. Perceiving memories as networked entities situates past-lived practices in the here and now. Memories of religious experiences may inform subsequent interactions and, thus, shape how the visitor confronts and engages with similar objects in the museum. Such experiences may involve (learned)

protocols, habituated practices and personal preferences. These, in turn, influence visitors' experiences in the museum and become enmeshed with the rationalist/Protestant modes already present in the museum. Again, ANT helps to illustrate how certain practices are maintained and endure (as stable networks) and how the museum environment may lead to modifications due to the different assemblages of material and immaterial actors.

In approaching this new terrain for material religion and museum visitor studies, there is a temptation to draw distinctions and comparisons between nonreligious and religious visitors. However, as noted in regard to the study of post-structuralism, this is an ill-advised way of researching everyday experiences. Religion and non-religion are not in binary opposition. Rather, visitors' experiences are amalgams of both religious and nonreligious knowledge and experiences. Pluralist spaces have received little attention in the study of material religion. ANT, in combination with the concepts and theories from material religion studies, provide ways to explore how these different networks interrelate. As spaces that foster variations of religious and nonreligious interactions, the museum environment necessitates a theoretical framework that can account for the ways that these different experiences impact upon one another. The theoretical and methodological practicalities of applying this multidimensional framework to empirical research will be discussed in the following chapter.

## chapter four:

# METHODOLOGY

The previous chapter introduced ANT as a theoretical framework to explore ‘sacred engagements’ between objects and museum visitors. In this chapter I examine ANT as a methodological framework while introducing the research project, questions and methods. To do this I explain my rationale for my methodological decisions and explore the various obstacles and opportunities that my chosen framework presented. As explained in the previous chapter, museum visitor research has failed to adequately recognise the agency of non-human actors within museum-based interactions, whilst material religious studies have rarely ventured into non-devotional spaces. The combination of these two academic disciplines and the employment of ANT as a framework to explore interactions provided a unique research opportunity with few comparable studies. The task of determining a suitable methodological approach was therefore both a learning and creative process of testing and adapting my tactics to best suit this field.

### Background

This study was conducted as an AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) collaborative doctorate with the University of Kent and the British Museum.<sup>44</sup> During the course of writing the literature review and conducting the fieldwork, the proposal and research questions were revised and modified. The original premise focused on the different ways of seeing or engaging with objects that relate to religious and secular subjectivities. Over time the religious and secular binary was discarded in order to enable a more nuanced understanding of visitor-object engagements. The British Museum, however, remained a constant fixture as the principal research site for the empirical study. This research centred on a physical location (the British Museum) but also extended beyond the material boundaries of the museum into other spaces and times. Bruno Latour discusses the inside/outside binary in his argument concerning the laboratory. According to Latour (1999a: 168) the laboratory may be fixed and bounded to a geographical space, but the experiments that are conducted there relate to processes, materials and organisms in a multitude of other places:

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<sup>44</sup> The original title of the project was: ‘Seeing the sacred in the museum: exploring the significance of religious and secular subjectivities for visitor engagement with religious objects’ (Lynch 2010a).

the laboratory is just a moment in a series of displacements that makes a complete shambles out of the inside/outside and the macro/micro dichotomies. No matter how divided they are on sociology of science, the macroanalysts and the microanalysts share one prejudice: *that science stops or begins at the laboratory walls.*

A distinction therefore exists between the physical space of a building (such as a laboratory or museum) and the network which connects actors from multiple realms. From an ANT perspective, the field is not a geographically defined site as the network continues to extend to other spaces both physical and conceptual. And so, the notion of having anything outside of the network is thus irrelevant. The temptation to step back and 'see the bigger picture' in order to identify grand narratives or wider themes is unfeasible; not even the researcher can leave the network. That vantage point of the field site does not exist. This does not mean that we cannot get an idea of what goes on within larger interconnected networks. Before satellites and air travel, cartographers were able to map areas of land with surprising accuracy simply by observing what was in their locality and plotting the surrounding areas. Area by area, countries were plotted using a variety of tools and methods, allowing travellers to follow and forge new paths. And so whilst this project focused on the British Museum, the actors I followed led me to other sites of interest, including places of worship and other museums.

This project was planned to coincide with two special exhibitions at the British Museum: *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (2011) and *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* (2012). (From here on these exhibitions will be referred to *Treasures* and *Hajj*, respectively.) Due to their religious content, these exhibitions offered many opportunities to observe how visitors interacted with exhibits and texts that related to their own religious practices and beliefs. They also attracted visitors who had little or no affiliation to the religions on display. By examining both of these visitor types, the exhibitions provided a greater potential for exploring how the visitors not only encountered the non-human actors, but also how these visitors interacted with one another. Existing studies on religious objects and rituals within museums have mostly focused on ethnographic collections and their affiliated communities within a post-colonial context (see: Karp and Lavine 1991, Ames 1992, and Simpson 1996). When such studies discuss the occurrence of religious practices, they often take place in private events or behind the scenes. This study differs in the fact that it is concerned with a far larger array of religious practices (including those related to the UK's major faith groups) and the ways they respond to public exhibitions and galleries.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The British Museum's exhibitions, as well as generating additional revenue (with the Reading Room exhibitions charging an admission of £12), constitute a vital part of the Museum's public engagement and education programme. They also provide opportunities for the Museum to focus on key areas of the collection and explore specific periods of history, which are supported by a programme of events, including debates and lectures.

*Treasures* was the British Museum's special exhibition for the summer of 2011.<sup>46</sup> Located in the round Reading Room, the exhibition featured over 150 objects from more than 40 institutions including exhibits from museums, churches, and the British Museum's own collection. The exhibition centred on the Christian tradition and practice of relic veneration within medieval Europe. However, the exhibition's main focus was not the body parts and possessions of the holy figures, which are rarely seen, but their ornate containers called reliquaries. To illustrate how these rituals developed, *Treasures* included artefacts from the late Roman period up until the Counter Reformation. The exhibition attracted almost 72,000 visitors (excluding schools and group ticket sales), 83% of which were from the UK and 17% from overseas. *Treasures* also marked the first exhibition to collate demographic data on religion. According to the report by MHM, 30% stated they had no religion, 23% were Catholic, 31% Church of England, and 9% were 'Christian other', plus 3% were Buddhist, 2% were Jewish, 2% were 'Other' (religions), and 1% were Hindu (MHM 2011).

The exhibition *Hajj*, which also took place in the British Museum's Reading Room, focused on the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca. The exhibition began with the various journeys pilgrims have made across the continents and over the centuries. The remainder of the exhibition illustrated how the pilgrims, both past and present, perform the rituals upon entry into Mecca. This was achieved through displays of historical and contemporary objects, including art, textiles, manuscripts, and souvenirs, as well as video, photography and audio features. *Hajj* was attended by almost 117,000 visitors (this number again excludes schools and group ticket sales). Of this, 84% were from the UK and 16% from overseas. In terms of religion, 39% were Sunni, 23% stated 'no religion', 22% stated Christian, 5% Hindu, 4% Shi'a, 4% 'Muslim - Other', and 5% 'Other' (religions). Buddhist, Jewish and Sikh visitors made up the remaining 3% (MHM 2012).

In the time between *Treasures* and *Hajj* was the special exhibition *Grayson Perry: The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (6 October 2011 to 26 February 2012) in Room 35; a smaller gallery on the upper floor of the Reading Room. The exhibition was curated by contemporary artist Grayson Perry and featured his works alongside artefacts he had selected from the British Museum's collections. The show explored a number of connected themes around craftsmanship and pilgrimage, including relics, shrines, and shamanism. Central to the pilgrimage theme, was the recurrent image of Perry's teddy bear. Through a sequence of first-person panels, Perry explained that the bear (called Alan Measles) was the "benign god" of his "imaginary world". The exhibition provided a very personal and playful exploration of pilgrimage, but unlike *Hajj* and *Treasures*, the deity was not part of a shared or established religion. I conducted around twenty interviews with visitors to Grayson Perry and yet, despite

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<sup>46</sup> *Treasures* was the second in a series of three British Museum exhibitions focusing on 'Spiritual Journeys', which began with *Journey through the Afterlife: Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (4 November 2010 - 6 March 2011) and ended with *Hajj*.

the omnipresent religious iconography and language within the exhibition's interpretation, the themes relating to religion were seldom raised. Although a number of visitors said that they related to Perry's experience of cherry picking rituals from both secular and religious life, the visitors did not describe feeling a connection to Alan Measles. Nor did I see any embodied responses while observing visitors within the exhibition that could be described as part of a religious practice. As this study is concerned with how visitors encounter and experience divine and supernatural presences, I chose not to focus on the *Grayson Perry* exhibition to the same measure as *Hajj and Treasures*.

The third focus of this research were the tours of the archaeological artefacts which relate to places, people, periods or specific events mentioned in the Old Testament (within the Christian and Jewish traditions) and the New Testament. Most of these tours are led by Jehovah's Witness 'brothers', but a small number are also led by staff or leaders from churches and synagogues. Unlike the exhibitions, the tours take place in the public galleries where people can visit artefacts from the Ancient Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian empires. Standing before the ancient objects, the guides explain the ways in which the interpretations of the artefacts relate to the biblical accounts. For many of the guides, the purpose of these tours is to illustrate events in the Old Testament. Many of the tours also work to confirm the validity and accuracy of the Scriptures by providing interpretations that are different and, at times, contradictory to the descriptions provided in the museum's panels and labels. The museum does not record data on organised groups and so there are no statistics or demographic information on the tour attendees and guides. However, in terms of religion, the tours are mostly composed of Christians (predominately Jehovah's Witnesses) and Jews. The former usually attend on Saturdays in their hundreds.

Unlike the exhibitions which presented objects and ambiances that evoked sites of worship, the tours presented activities whereby the religious context and material content were brought into the museum by the guides and attendees, in the form of the Scriptures (whether memorised or read from a physical Bible). The tours, therefore, provided an opportunity to examine how a religious framework for engaging with the objects was managed by the visitors themselves as opposed to the museum (exhibition) staff.

## Applying ANT to the field of museums

Before I explain how I use ANT as a methodological framework, I wish to define a number of key terms within the theory:

**Network:** A network was described by Callon (1993: 263) as a "group of unspecified relationships among entities of which the nature itself is undetermined". As the network is comprised of relations that are formed through actions, a network is constantly changing and never static. In terms of its function within a research capacity, the network "is a tool to help

describe something, not what is being described” (Latour 2005: 131). The network is therefore a way to illustrate how particular actors interact.

**Actor:** An actor is any entity that transforms another entity. According to Latour something is only an actor if it can be said to act (2004). Actors can be anything: human, animal, object, concept and so forth. The “key is” according to Latour (1999b: 303) “to define the actor by what it does.”

**Agency,** in ANT, is transformative action. Within ANT, any actor can act – whether they are human or non-human.

My use of ANT informed the design, execution and analysis of my fieldwork. The purpose of ANT is to follow the actors *in action*. For this reason my research not only included interviews with the (human) actors but also observations of their interactions with other entities within the field. The actions that make up particular object-based engagements are central to my understanding of the sacred-as-agency, which acknowledges the embodied, spatial, sensual, and spiritual dimensions of everyday experiences. By tracing associations between particular actors, overlooked entities became visible. This often led me to discover unexpected actors and interactions, some of which existed within the field and others that did not, such as the absence of particular scents. Through identifying continuities, ruptures, absences and adaptations, the network approach provided unique insights into the events observed at a micro-level.

I began my fieldwork early in my research due to the exhibition schedule. The first month of my fieldwork was therefore a time of experimentation. One of my initial challenges was to work out how ANT operates in the field. Many applications of ANT are purely theoretical or applied at the interpretation stage of empirical studies that have used traditional ethnographic methods. My research also adopted conventional empirical methods of data collection (interviews and observation) but with an objective to follow lines of enquiry that led to a variety of actors, both human and non-human and the natural and supernatural. However, a methodology that enables one to follow ‘anything’ inevitably leads to a process of selection. The relations that exist within any museum-based interaction extend well beyond the museum walls and so surpassed my awareness and ability to trace what they were. What existed outside of my own frame of reference was obviously excluded. Actors within ANT are made knowable through their interrelations with other actors. Yet, what is knowable and defined in the research is limited. Stewart Lockie (2002), in writing about food production and consumption argues that the consumer has been made increasingly invisible to the producer and vice versa. However, “through the application of technologies including market research,

survey data and point of sale record keeping” the consumer is made knowable to the producer (Lockie 2002: 425). In other words, the consumer’s interaction with (or mediation through) the research methods makes them visible. Similarly, my interviews and observations also made certain actors more knowable than others. What became knowable and thus traceable operated in a ripple-effect, as one actor interacted with another. For example, if a visitor mentioned a certain label, its content would lead me to the dates and places mentioned in the text, whilst its placement would draw attention to other material actors in close proximity.

At regular intervals during my fieldwork, I analysed my data through transcribing and then coding my interviews and observations to help to identify particular actors to follow in future interactions. Essentially this became a cyclical process of funnelling by which the ongoing analysis of my data became a lens through which I viewed the field. And so by tracing the network I was not trying to capture a ‘true’ image of what was taking place at particular times in the museum. Rather, I used this approach to focus in on particular actors in order to understand their relationships. Latour (2005) advises researchers not to enter the field with preconceptions about the nature of the networks. In practice it is almost impossible not to have some idea about what will be taking place, especially as I am a frequent exhibition visitor. I therefore adopted an open line of questioning in order to create opportunities for actors to reveal themselves. Writing about coding, Passoth and Rowland (2011: 12) warned that the process, when focused on “constant comparison and on reduction”, may lead to “homogeneity and to a tendency to discard findings that do not fit into neat coding schemes.” They therefore advise researchers to do the opposite:

the method has to be used as a heterogeneity enhancing procedure... to keep the coding scheme open as long as possible [in order to avoid]... a reduction rather than expansion of codes, themes, and categories.

And so, for this study, I resisted coding only actors of one type (such as material objects) and instead coded a wide variety of phenomena, some of which were networks of interaction within their own right. These included material objects but also absences, sounds and spaces. This provided a more nuanced understanding of the museum engagements, which highlighted their fragmented and multiple qualities.

To help to reduce any bias on my part, I also actively sought to decentre some of the more prominent actors (e.g. the visitors) in order to examine entities that were active in more subtle ways (and could not, due to their non-human status, be interviewed). For example, after noticing that visitors to *Treasures* would often touch the display cases, I paid particular attention to the different ‘things’ the glass cases came into contact with. These ‘things’, as I would witness, not only included fingers, noses and lips, but also possessions visitors brought along to bless. These blessed objects presented a new line of enquiry to follow. The actors

that came to my attention were therefore made visible not only through what the visitors said, but also through their physical and material embodied interactions with non-humans within the museum space. And so, tracing the network created a moment to homogenise the human and non-human actors and then re-insert the power configurations which played such a large part in determining the nature of the interactions. Through this process, many of the often overlooked and mundane actors, such as the various items of furniture, sounds and smells encountered in the museum, became more conspicuous.

## The research questions

Having explored the practical and theoretical concepts of ANT early on in the study, the descriptive nature of the approach heavily influenced how I chose to express the research questions. The research questions had to be open enough not to erect any boundaries in terms of what could be traced. They also had to imply an exploratory as opposed to an explanatory approach. However, as with all ANT studies, the research had to be focused in order to avoid confused accounts of woolly networks and vague connections. No network can ever be traced in its entirety and so with infinite possibilities to explore in any one situation the research question would name the fundamental actors in the connections I was to focus on. Informed by the literature review, the identification of these actors would provide a spotlight to investigate in what ways these actors acted and what other entities were embroiled within these actions.

As this research aims to understand how divine or supernatural beings are experienced within the museum, I refer back to my conception of the sacred as described in the previous chapter. In the museum, object-based 'sacred engagements', as I call them, involve four core components: the visitor, a museum object, a divine or supernatural being and a physical place in space and time for this encounter to occur. When these elements converge in the collaborative agency of these entities emerge as a sacred engagement. The nature of these engagements varies depending on who and what is engaging and therefore allow for a diverse range of experiences. With this understanding of the sacred in mind, the primary research questions are worded as follows:

How do visitors, objects and divine/supernatural beings engage in museum spaces? What actors are involved? How do they interact? In what ways do these interactions enable or disable a divine/supernatural presence?

This form of questioning seeks not to explain but to describe how different entities interrelated within certain situations. On a more methodological note, a subsidiary question is identified:

How can we map and describe engagements between visitors, objects and divine/supernatural beings?

This question focuses on the research methods and the logistics of working with human and non-human actors and therefore provides an opportunity at the end to reflect on the process. Furthermore, this research identifies gaps within both museum visitor research and material religion studies. Through addressing the above questions, this work proposes an alternative approach that will attend to these oversights.

## **The researcher**

Tracing my own experiences of the field, as a researcher, featured a different assemblage of actors to those of my participants. Many of the connections that existed for me did not connect in the same ways (or at all) for my informants. Likewise, the networks that my visitors brought with them often extended beyond my knowledge and interactions with them. The point at which I started to trace the actors therefore changed how the different elements were networked. The process of tracing connections also highlighted certain discrepancies between the ways I, as the researcher, viewed particular connections in comparison to how some of my informants described their own experiences. For example, a small number of visitors I interviewed actively rejected the notion that they perform religious rituals. Yet in tracing their encounters in the exhibition, in relation to other visitors, some of their experiences were identified as engagements that encompassed religious practices and rituals. Visitors' resistance to particular terms became actors within themselves as they mediated and transformed interactions between the visitor and the objects. Some terms, therefore, took on a double meaning within the research. Through this project, I carefully considered the usage of my own terms and themes, and those of my informants, as well as the ways I perceived the actors. Fenwick (2011: 123) proposes a similar approach in regard to the use of ANT:

ANT-readings need to move as carefully and reflexively as possible, mindful of their own tendency to create obligatory points of passage, cautious in neither totalizing nor ignoring phenomena unfolding, and mindful of both their own highly provisional accounts and the entanglement of these accounts in constituting the phenomena being read.

In order to limit the potential for privileging the participation of particular actors over others, I used a mix of ethnographic methods (as will be explained) and 'traced the action' from a variety of starting points. Throughout my analysis and interpretation, I also sought to underline the disorganised and precarious nature of the interactions, which are difficult to predict.

As a researcher on a collaborative project my role was multifaceted. Based within the Interpretation team's office, which oversees the development of new content within the museum and evaluates exhibitions and galleries, my role in the offices of the museum was

sometimes participatory (for instance, when assisting at an event), sometimes observational (in exhibition meetings) and sometimes archival (when analysing the museum's meeting minutes and catalogues).<sup>47</sup> Crossing the threshold into the public galleries of the museum I remained a researcher but also, in the eyes of the visitors, a member of staff. I wore the staff pass and carried with me a set of office keys. As an institution that conducts frequent visitor surveys and evaluations, my presence was not unusual; however, my purpose was unique for two reasons. Firstly, my data was for my doctorate and not directly for the museum (although I did share my findings with the museum as part of the project's impact strategy) and secondly, that the research itself explored religion and religious objects, and so was not a standard marketing/exhibition evaluation exercise required to compare outcomes to objectives. My privileged access was therefore coupled with an ambiguity around my role and position within the museum. Speaking in ANT terms, in some situations my network was more stable (and thus familiar) than in others. My experience of unfamiliarity was exemplified when I visited places of worship and participants' homes, where I had no privileged access.<sup>48</sup> However, as explained, never was I or any of the actors I studied outside of the network. The network merely extended to include more settings and actors.

### **The divine and supernatural actors**

My conception of the sacred, as a form of agency, includes entities which evade direct observation and therefore must be observed through other actors. For the networks I studied, the most elusive actors were the divine and supernatural beings. My experiences of these beings were not monitored in the field, but mediated through other actors including the visitors, texts and objects. Locating the divine experiences within the network rejects the notion that actors such as deities exist outside of the empirical field. For example, Roland Robertson's (1970) term 'super-empirical' implies a distinction between the imminent (empirical) and transcendent (super-empirical) realms. However, in my understanding of the network, there are no transcendent realms. Instead, divine or supernatural beings are connected through interactions between people and things. Yet unlike a material object on display within a museum, it is not possible to identify a point in Euclidean space where

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<sup>47</sup> I attended and assisted a number of events at the British Museum, including a family workshop at the Samsung Digital Discovery Centre on Buddhism (2011), a 'Talking objects' workshop during the run of *Treasures* in 2011 and a community workshop for older adults as part of the exhibition programme for *Hajj* (2012).

<sup>48</sup> As part of this research project, I visited other museums in order to view similar exhibitions and galleries and interview staff. These included the National Gallery, the British Library, the Jewish Museum, the Smithsonian museums in Washington DC and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (and Cloisters) in New York, amongst others. I also visited places of worship mentioned by my informants including the London Central Mosque, Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, Durham Cathedral and Canterbury Cathedral. Furthermore, I visited a number of informants at home.

multiple encounters concerning the divine converge within the network. God, even in the monotheistic-focused exhibitions and activities, was not experienced or related to as the exact same entity but as many different things. In Annemarie Mol's (2003: 5) writings on the human body, she argues that every 'thing' is inherently multiple:

objects come into being – and disappear – with the practices in which they are manipulated. And since the object of manipulation tends to differ from one practice to another, reality multiplies...

Should I therefore speak of gods in the plural instead of the singular proper noun? As I see it, interactions that engage with a deity, for example within an act of veneration, link to a divine presence. The essence of this presence is, within the Abrahamic faiths, a single deity.<sup>49</sup> In most cases, therefore, my informants (who believe in God within the Christian, Islamic or Judaic faiths) recognise the divine as one. However, my informants' experiences of the divine vary considerably between religions, non-religions and individuals. And so in following the interactions that make a sacred connection, there are in fact many divine actors. Yet, through the process of analysing and interpreting the empirical findings, the different experiences of the divine connect to each other. Mol (2003: 5) describes this process:

For even if objects differ from one practice to another, there are relations between these practices. Thus, far from necessarily falling into fragments, multiple objects tend to hang together somehow.

Through the process of following the actors, I am making connections between entities which share characteristics across many experiences. The individual encounters of the divine, as described in the museum, transform from multiple experiences of the divine within the field to a single multidimensional actor made up of many experiences. I will therefore use the capitalised and singular 'God' to refer to the object of worship in the Abrahamic religions. This 'God' is an assemblage of many realities of the deity, including different conceptions of the supreme being within religious and nonreligious understandings. When conceived within the Abrahamic belief systems, this God acts as one entity. A Catholic visitor to the exhibition *Hajj* demonstrated this point when discussing how he could relate to the Islamic pilgrimage:

I mean it's a different place but it's the same God, it's the same idea. Ok, they go once a year, [the pilgrims] wear specific clothes, it's one of the pillars of Islam. It's the same God, so it's just a different way.

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<sup>49</sup> Although the Abrahamic religions share fundamental similarities, the religions also present many theological incompatibilities and disagreements in regard to how the different doctrines and institutions conceive God. And so while the Abrahamic deity may be understood as a shared actor within the network, visitors may perceive their God to be distinct from the divine beings in other faiths.

For this visitor the mediators varied between the religions, but 'God' remained constant. I therefore find it useful to see God (in the singular) as a 'boundary object' as the divine has "different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable" (Star and Griesemer 1989: 393). God, or any supernatural being, is many things for many people, but in all these different experiences lie a common thread which ties them together. Even the remark "I don't believe in God", makes a connection to the divine actor albeit in a non-sacred form. If God is a boundary object then the boundary object is both an actor and a network of actors which all answer to the same name.<sup>50</sup> In Jon Bialecki's (2014: 16) article, 'Does God Exist in Methodological Atheism?', he also perceives God as an assemblage:

God is in essence a hybrid object, composed by a series of heterogeneous constitutive objects set in relation to each other... as well as numerous productive and stabilizing texts, such as the before mentioned prayer manuals and hand written journals.

And it is through these hybridised networks with texts and materials that God and other spiritual actors become accessible, knowable and recognisable.

To help illustrate this point further, I recount an episode from my childhood. At the age of around seven, I received a gift from a relative entitled *The Anti-Coloring Book* (Striker 1986). On one of the pages was an empty frame with a caption beneath that read: "What do you think God looks like?". I knew even at this age that I did not believe in God, but despite my lack of faith, I had a few vague understandings of the Abrahamic deity including His omnipotent and omnipresent qualities. Faced with the challenge of illustrating *the* supreme being, I recall being struck by the contradictory nature of what God was meant to be and look like. I suppose I could have left the page blank, but instead I coloured in the entire page with a thick black marker. I had managed to evoke a sense of 'everywhereness', I thought (albeit within the confines of the activity frame), but failed miserably in showing God's invisible quality. God was not scribbles. Even though I did not worship a divine being, God existed as an actor in my network which conformed to a number of shared rules, including the commandment that prohibited the creation of graven images. Looking at the activity book, I felt uneasy; I had made God visible and material. My bewilderment, manifested in that page of scribbles, revealed an ensemble of ideas, texts and images that I had so far encountered within these formative years. Even today I find depictions of God – cloud-bound, bearded and white-skinned – out of place. Why, when I do not believe that there is a God? And in part that is why the notion of truth in regard to existence is not central. Because even if I do not believe in the existence of a God as a force which created life, it does not mean that God as an actor does not exist in my network and that the God in my network does not share qualities with

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<sup>50</sup> The term 'gods', in the non-capitalised plural form, will be used to refer to deities in polytheistic religions.

the God that people worship. They share qualities because God is framed and mediated by networks of devotees and non-devotees. Reflecting on my seven-year-old self, I cannot recall whether I felt bad because the work was aesthetically poor, because I may have offended a religious community or because I had disrespected God Himself. The 'artwork' was demonstrating its own agency that most probably combined all three: the aesthetic, the social and the divine. Objects have that ability: to straddle multiple networks at the same time. Even when the object is gone, it can persist 'networked' as a memory. What this vignette helps to demonstrate, I hope, is how divine or supernatural beings interact with the material, which can include – but, thankfully, are not limited to – the unsatisfactory scrawls of nonreligious children.

ANT employs its own form of methodological agnosticism and so the approach cannot be used to determine whether God exists. Existence within the network comes about through actors' participation with material and human actors. Thus, if God is associated within a devotional practice between a person and an object, God is also an active element as much as any other actor. This study is not seeking to question the validity of whether divine actors (or supernatural beings) exist but to understand how sacred engagements arise and what factors may threaten or enhance their presence.

## Research methods and recruitment

I employed a mix of methods in my fieldwork, which included interviews, observation and participant observation. The data collection centred on three 'fields': the special exhibition *Treasures*, the exhibition *Hajj* (both of which took place in the British Museum's round Reading Room), and the externally-organised tours that visit the 'biblical' archaeology within the permanent galleries. I also observed and interviewed visitors at a number of other galleries and exhibitions to build a more informed picture of the different interactions that take place in the museum.<sup>51</sup> However, for this research I chose to concentrate on the three named fields. By selecting these fields, the space and the material environment became the constant variable. And so, through the process of tracing the action, I was able to examine the different and sometimes contradictory ways the same actors were interacted with.

Museums use a variety of methods to evaluate visitors within galleries.<sup>52</sup> The British Museum quantifies how well a particular display performs in a gallery by its attracting power (how

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<sup>51</sup> These exhibitions included *Images and Sacred Texts: Buddhism Across Asia* (14 October 2010 - 3 April 2011), *Agents of the Buddha* (11 November 2010 – 9 January 2011), *Sikh Fortress Turban* (17 February - 17 April 2011), *Grayson Perry: The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* (6 October 2011 - 26 February 2012), and *Sacred Souvenir: A Model of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre* (2 February - 6 May 2012).

<sup>52</sup> The agency Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (MHM 2011) conducted a mixed-methods study of the British Museum's exhibition visitors. The evaluation covered matters including visitors' awareness of the

many visitors approach the display) and its holding power (how long visitors stay at the object). These figures are then calculated to gauge, on average, how successful the display or exhibition is. However, what this approach fails to show is the quality of this experience. Is the visitor engaged with the object or could they be standing there for another reason? This method neglects to provide the qualitative data required to understand the nature of the engagements. Although, on occasion, the dwell and holding times were noteworthy. For instance, when visitors stated the time they spent in a particular room as testament to how much they were engaged or when visitors said how they lost track of time.<sup>53</sup> Yet, as a qualitative study, I chose not to use methods that timed or counted visitors at particular exhibits. Before embarking on my fieldwork, I tested the 'tracking' observational technique many publically-funded museums employ. This involved selecting a visitor (e.g. every *n*th person that entered a gallery), drawing the visitor's route on a copy of the floorplan and timing how long they stood in front of particular exhibits. This form of tracking had two main outcomes. First, by totalling the time spent before each object the most popular object could be determined. Secondly, through assessing how the visitor moved around the gallery (and with whom) the type of visitor can be assigned a visitor profile from a prescribed list. For instance, visitors who looked at mostly everything equally would be 'browsers' whereas visitors who spent long periods before one or two cases could be classed as 'searchers' or 'researchers'. Although other behaviours can be noted, such as using a multimedia guide, the quantitative approach is limited to defined types of behaviour. This data would, therefore, only reveal the popularity of particular spaces and not the quality of the interaction. The 'tracking' method also failed to explore individual engagements between objects and visitors. Instead these 'actors' were isolated from their networks and tallied for statistical analysis and so, eventually, completely abstracted.

I considered observation a significant part of my fieldwork, but as qualitative data for qualitative analysis as opposed to quantitative research. It was also not possible to track visitors for the entire exhibition as the time each visitor spent in the exhibition (or museum as a whole) was too great. Yet, some of the techniques used in my 'tracking' experiment were useful. For example, my observations had to go undetected to avoid disrupting and even impacting on the visitors' experience. Covertly looking through and in the reflection of glass

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marketing, interpretation, sponsorship and an accompanying programme of events; their motivations, expectations and outcomes; access provision; website and shop usage and the overall spend. The agency conducted two focus groups of visitors, 149 exit surveys and 66 on-the-spot interviews within the exhibition. The British Museum also ran a number of smaller, internal studies to determine the efficacy of the films and music.

<sup>53</sup> Cheung On Tam (2008: 7) experienced similar articulations of time in regard to how museum visitors view artworks, and concluded that his participants' "sense of temporality had vanished". These responses, said Tam, were an indication that visitors had found the works meaningful and were 'absorbed' in what they saw.

cases, and appearing to study or sketch exhibits were some of many tactics I employed to make myself inconspicuous. This took some practice, both practically and psychologically. Feelings of paranoia that the observed visitors knew that I was following them took a while to dispel but, after interviewing some of the visitors I observed, I was assured that my presence was (mostly) unobtrusive. I also made notes of the time when visitors spent long periods at certain displays. This data was not for quantitative analysis, but to aid the qualitative descriptions, by indentifying (through observations and the exit interview) what actors contributed to these extended encounters. For instance, was the object displayed in an island case (which allowed the visitor to view all four sides)? What was the length and content of the labels? Was the object particularly intricate? Was the object a stop on the multimedia tour or by a bench? Or simply was the object in a spot less prone to bottlenecking? Investigating the actors that led to a long interaction, enabled me to identify possible actors to consider during subsequent interviews and observations.

To ensure that the study encompassed a diverse mix of informants, ethnic and religious minorities were over-sampled so that the project covered a variety of religious experiences. If a purely representative UK sample was sought for this project, it would lead to a dominance of white, nonreligious or nominally Christian participants, with insufficient representation of religious minority groups. By intentionally over-sampling minority groups, I was able to obtain comparable levels of data not only for visitors who did not practise a religion, but Christians (including those from Eastern Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant denominations), Muslims, and to a lesser degree Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and new age practitioners and adherents of other faiths. I also attended exhibition previews for local community groups, which offered free entry to the exhibitions and removed the potential barrier of the ticket price. In addition, I set up a table at a British Museum members' event (in 2012) in order to interview members about their reasons for attending or not attending the exhibitions. As the annual membership fee includes access to the special exhibitions, members ordinarily visit more exhibitions across a wider range of subjects. These events therefore provided opportunities to speak to visitors with different pre-entry motivations and knowledge of the exhibitions. For example, some event attendees I spoke to had not heard of the exhibitions before coming and would not have chosen to visit without either the complimentary pass (for the community previews) or their annual membership. These events also enabled me to speak to visitors who had chosen not to see the exhibitions. I was therefore able to capture some of those reasons that led visitors to stay away.

The recordings of my observations, written in my field notes, supplemented the information obtained through interviews. This data also helped me to select my participants. With no selection data regarding religion or religious practices to help choose participants, I relied on two aspects to improve my chances of finding people who had previous experiences with religious objects. The first was dress (including clerical clothing, jewellery, headscarves, and so on) and the second was behaviour. As I walked around, I looked for particular responses –

repeatedly touching cases, fiddling with religious jewellery, kneeling, mouthing words, crossing themselves, sitting for long periods before particular objects, and so forth. Although some of these embodied responses could be interpreted as more 'religious' than others, it was critical to also interview the observed visitors in order to determine how they articulated their responses and to check that I had not mistaken their behaviour for something it was not. For example, fatigue was frequently misidentified as something more meditative. I was also interested to interview participants who were performing other behaviours such as making notes, sketching, listening to the multimedia guide and accompanying children. Finally, to ensure a variety of participant types, no observation data was collected for around a third of the interviews; I simply asked visitors to participate before they exited. This was to lessen the effect of any selection bias on my part. The observations, albeit for small periods of participants' time in the exhibition, provided more data to build a network of the visitors' museum experience. What was important to record was not only what object they responded to but how they responded to it. In what ways did they physically engage with the object? Did they incorporate their own objects or other people in the act? Did other visitors respond to them? Although, at times it was difficult to see the acts distance also gave me an advantage of being inconspicuous and thus able to track visitors between different objects and look for repeated and variations of behaviour.

Noting physical behaviours in order to understand particular interactions poses its own problems. Wallbott and Scherer (1989: 56) state that emotional experiences can only be studied using "the introspective report of an experiencing subject". The authors advocate self report as opposed to measures of expressive behaviour as it provides "access to motivational changes and action tendencies as well as the subjective state" (1989: 57). In my experience of observing people in museums, I have to agree in part with Wallbott and Scherer as without the visitor expressing verbally what they are feeling, physical reactions to certain stimuli provide little insight into how, why and what they are reacting to. Visitors to public museums also tend to control their emotional expressions, whether consciously or unconsciously, which can make the job of assessing visitors' experiences through observation even more difficult. However, observational data situated within the field enables one to note how visitors' embodied acts affect and incorporate other human and non-human actors. For these reasons, I chose to couple my observational data with open-ended, semi-structured interviews. The coupling of these two approaches addressed weaknesses in each. For instance, it is not possible for visitors to recall every interaction and so the observational data was used as a prompt in post-observation interviews. They also highlighted contradictions between the two sets of data and helped me to reduce the risk of misreading visitors' behaviours and comments.

The majority of my interviews were with visitors I met on the day of their visit. These often took place at the exit of the exhibition. When the visitor had the time and desire to sit down, I took them to the seated area within the British Museum's Great Court. The latter often led to

a longer, more in-depth discussion. I was also able to pre-arrange some of the interviews. For example, a number of church groups promoted their organised trip to see *Treasures* on their website. I was therefore able to contact the group's organiser and set up a meeting at a seated area in the museum. This method was also used to recruit the tour groups, as most of them advertise online.

In terms of observation, the externally-organised tours of the museum's 'biblical archaeology' differed to the exhibitions as it would have been impractical to covertly follow the tours around the museum. For this reason, I conducted participant observation. By taking part in the tours, I was able to experience firsthand the ways in which the attendees interacted with the guides, objects, and with each other. To fully participate, I also wore the audio-guide, when offered, and held my own copy of the Bible when requested. And yet, as my role as researcher was announced to the groups (by the guides), it was also likely that my agenda as a researcher (and not a member of their congregation) had an effect on the tours. However, as the guides tend to follow a script (whether read or memorised), I was confident that what I observed was comparable to the tours that I did not attend. In conjunction with my observations, I conducted exit interviews with the tour guides and attendees to build a more detailed picture of the networks.

A major factor in the selection of participants was the visitors' decisions whether to attend the exhibitions or partake in the tours. In *Museum Gallery Interpretation and Material Culture*, Juliette Fritsch (2011: 101) writes:

The most obvious initial differentiation [between exhibition and public gallery spaces]... was the self-selection of visitors to the exhibition, made as they stepped over the boundary of free entry to the main museum, to paying for a specific exhibition entry ticket.

Although visitors' intentions play a dominant role in bringing visitors to specific museum activity other 'things' are implicated in this process. The 'self' in 'self-selection' is therefore far too limiting. Like artefacts, tours and ticketed exhibitions also draw and drive away visitors. In other words, their assemblages of objects, texts, designers, curators, and so forth are active in the selection of the visitor as much as the visitor is active in selecting the exhibition or tour. Couple this with the marketing drives (which are often targeted at limited audience segments) and the programme of activities, it is evident that a whole assemblage of actors and activities work to attract audiences. The magnetic effect of exhibitions work both ways in repelling and attracting visitors. Whilst the price of a ticket may put some people off, it adds a sense of prestige for others. Similarly, the act of booking and queuing for a ticket in advance, waiting for the timed entry, and going through the security check, separate the permanent (free) museum from the exhibition space. Such measures of exclusion often create a sense of exclusivity which, in turn, raises expectations. For instance, booking a time slot to visit an

exhibition changes how a visitor plans and spends their time in the space. Museum visitors spend much longer in paid exhibitions as opposed to the free galleries, for the simple fact that they want to get value for money. Crossing the threshold between the public gallery and an exhibition or tour is therefore not only a sequence of material and immaterial barriers that filter out certain visitors, but ensembles of enticements. Of course, these processes lead to a narrower audience in terms of their interests, knowledge and experiences.

## Questions

For the interviews I devised a questionnaire to provide a semi-structure to the activity, which evolved over the course of the fieldwork (see Appendices). The presence of the questionnaire, along with my security pass, also assured my interviewees of my position as a staff member. Over time, I relied on the questionnaire less as I became familiar with the content, which allowed for a more conversational flow. I only ever returned to the structured format when the interview stumbled, for instance, because the informant did not want to expand or share an opinion. In using a semi-structured interview my aim was not to construct a narrative that expressed the experiences and perspectives of individual visitors. Rather, my objective was to discern moments of encounter between various elements within the galleries, which included the visitor but also other human and non-human entities.

My interview questions were broad in order to avoid leading participants to responses. I began by asking how they found out about the exhibition, what they expected and what they felt during their visit, I was able to gauge many of their motivations, previous experiences of similar objects and their relationship to the British Museum. If the visitor did not raise religion in these early questions (for instance, when asked about their reasons for attending), religion was often less of a motivational factor for visiting. In such cases where religion was not raised at all by the interviewee, I resorted to a more prying line of enquiry, asking them to compare their experience of the exhibition (*Treasures*) with places of worship or, failing that, questioning whether the exhibition had a religious significance for them. When I felt that the subject of religion might be met with resistance, I switched tactics and instead asked about some of the other responses I had observed, such as visitors praying in the exhibition. This indirect form of questioning prompted some interesting responses from identification to disapproval. In order to clarify visitors' religious or nonreligious identities, I finished the interview by asking some standard demographic questions about age range, ethnicity, nationality and religion (which I presented on a printed form). This was a final opportunity to raise the subject of religion. The closing question also led to some notable disparities between how particular visitors discussed their religious practices and beliefs and how they identified themselves in the final demographic questions. For example, a number of self-described lapsed Catholics discussed how their religious pasts shaped their visits. Yet, when asked to describe their religious identities some of these visitors chose the 'no religion' category.

Having both forms of question therefore provided a glimpse of the complexities religion posed in these visitors' lives. Furthermore, not all of my informants would have considered their position on supernatural and divine actors, as Woodhead (2012: 6) points out:

most of our cognition takes place at a subconscious or pre-conscious level which, though it may be brought to conscious awareness, needs time, effort, opportunity, and social support to be articulated.

For the short interviews in particular, I was aware that visitors had little time to reflect and comprehend their experiences. People also have the tendency to echo the words of others, be it an institution, Scripture or an individual. Responses were therefore carefully analysed in light of any subtext and observational data.

In determining what objects played a part in participants' visits to *Treasures*, I experimented with the terminology of a number of questions. Asking participants what objects they were 'interested' in seemed to lead to responses that were more intellectualised, whereas questioning participants on what they 'liked' led to answers that were more aesthetic (focusing on the visual). I wanted to capture the emotional, religious and spiritual responses to objects, and so instead settled on the question: "Were you drawn to some objects more than others?" The word 'drawn' elicited a broad range of responses, without constricting the replies to a certain type of engagement. The question also suggested a sense of selection on the part of the visitor as well as a pull from the object (and thus recognising the object's agency and power to elicit particular behaviours).<sup>54</sup> Depending on the response, I asked why they felt drawn to the mentioned object(s) and whether they had encountered such an object prior to their visit. If they had previous experiences of religious rituals with similar objects elsewhere, my questions then turned to enquiring whether they were able to engage with the object in the same way in the museum (and if not, why not). Starting with the open and non-specific 'drawn to' question and moving on to more specific lines of enquiry, gradually built a picture of the different actors that shaped and informed the visitors' encounters, both within and beyond the museum space.

I also found it useful to ask visitors about the aspects of the exhibition that they were less drawn to, did not like or jarred (I usually gave all three options). While some visitors (rightfully) remarked that if they were not drawn to something they could not identify what it was, this question did elicit some useful comments that reflected visitors' lack of interests and general dislikes. For example, at the *Grayson Perry* exhibition, when I asked a visitor what she was less

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<sup>54</sup> A visitor to *Treasures* explained how the objects attracted and held his attention. He stated, "there's no doubt that some of them just grab your attention more than others, maybe because of the way they're lit or the intricacy of them and the story behind them... If it has an interesting story then you'll look at it more". There is, therefore, an array of actors at play.

drawn to, she responded: “There was a lot of religious iconography which possibly [trails off]... because I don’t particularly follow any religion I wasn’t so drawn to but again I can really understand how it related to the exhibition.” However, many of my informants were less inclined to share negative comments, which may have been due to the fact that the visitors viewed me as museum staff and implicated within the exhibition.

My lines of enquiry at *Treasures* focused on objects for two reasons. Firstly, the relics and reliquaries were the focus of the exhibition and secondly, the relics invoke particular rituals which require their material presence. At the *Hajj* exhibition questioning visitors on the objects they were most drawn to failed to determine how the divine was experienced in the space. This was due to the fact that this exhibition was less dependent on objects to communicate the rituals. As objects also play a subordinate role within the devotional practises of Sunni Muslims (who made up the majority of the exhibition’s Muslim visitors), I adapted my questions to reflect the specificities of the Islamic faith and the nature of the exhibition. Hence, instead of asking about the “objects”, I asked what “aspects” of the exhibition they were most drawn to. This small change returned responses which ranged from discussions around specific images and the film, to the general ambience of the gallery space. Similarly, questioning visitors on whether they had experienced comparable objects in other places (of worship) made little sense at the exhibition *Hajj*. The place of comparison was Mecca itself. I did not explicitly ask visitors to compare their exhibition visit to Mecca, as this may have been seen as insensitive. Instead I asked visitors whether they had performed the pilgrimage. This question led some visitors to draw correlations and differences between their experiences. Some informants simply stated that the exhibition could not compare to the ‘real’ pilgrimage site, which indicated the distinctiveness of Mecca and its surrounding sacred sites. By contrast, other visitors spoke about the different opportunities the exhibition enabled, which would not have been possible in Mecca itself (such as having the space and time to view the textiles).

A further line of enquiry that proved useful was asking informants, who visited with others, about conversations they had during their visit. This provided access into the visitors’ social interactions and often prompted further discussions and reflections amongst the groups of informants, which I could observe. For instance, a visitor to *Hajj* remarked that she spoke to her friend about her personal experiences of the pilgrimage, which led me to question her companion, who had not been to Mecca, on how these comments affected her visit.

For this research, I also attended guided tours of the museum’s ‘biblical archaeology’ in the permanent galleries. I made initial contact with some of the tours via email (after finding their websites) and by approaching the guides in the museum. As opposed to the covert observations I conducted at the exhibitions, my presence on the tour (and role as a researcher) was known. I was, therefore, able to listen in on the tour guides’ commentaries and the attendees’ questions and comments. This offered a different form of access to the

speech acts made during the visit, as I was there at the time of the interaction and so was not subject to the interviewees' selections and reflections. I supplemented this research with interviews and conversations with the tour guides and attendees.

## Analysis

The process of analysing the data began with reviewing my early transcripts and field notes in order to establish a provisional framework for analysing subsequent observations and interviews. This framework was continually reviewed to identify key concepts and patterns as they emerged. Using the qualitative analysis software NVivo, I coded my interview transcripts, observation notes, press articles and label texts. NVivo is an analysis tool which enables users to code data through identifying sections of text and labelling the section (called creating a 'node'). Through re-using particular coding labels, patterns and themes emerged across the data. The process of labelling data sources inevitably created new analytical networks across interviews, articles and my own notes. The software therefore became a useful tool to explore and trace connections. I also tried to code evenly to ensure consistency in my analysis.

Beekhuyzen et al. (2010) advocate the use of NVivo and its applicability to ANT for looking at an activity from multiple perspectives. The authors install a 'looking glass' metaphor to explain how the data is smashed into pieces and, through the creation of nodes, reconstructed by the researcher into "something meaningful" (2010: 1). While assessing the data as fragmentary was a useful method of identifying trends, it was crucial to remain connected to the source data as a whole to prevent losing sight of the actors' original interactions. It was also vital to maintain coherence as this may have been lost in the process of coding and analysis if particular links were not preserved.

In the early stages of the research, themes developed organically. Some of these arose in interviews. For example, if a visitor stressed something this often led me to look out for similar occurrences in subsequent interviews (and re-analyse my completed transcripts). The repetition of particular actors was also considered. For example, at *Haji*, many of my informants mentioned listening in or speaking to other visitors at the exhibition. This form of social interaction became a theme (and NVivo node) within my ongoing analysis of both my interview data and observations. Furthermore, themes arose through observing the exhibited objects and the material spaces. For instance, the presence (and absence) of the benches were mentioned by visitors, but it was only by observing the embodied interactions that took place around the seating that I saw how they also obstructed visitors' abilities to prostrate before the objects. The accumulation of actors and particular themes was made possible due to the quantity of data I collected through the high number of interviews and interactions observed. And so, my research did not consist of case studies in the traditional sense, where one person was the central figure within a narrative of enquiry. Instead, the exhibition and tours were my case studies. The amount of interviews and field notes thus added to the rigour of this work.

## Ethics

The study's empirical work raised issues of participants' rights of informed consent, anonymity and data protection, all of which were managed within the ethical framework for research practice used by the British Museum and the University of Kent. From the outset of interviews, I explained the nature of the project and gave participants the opportunity to withdraw either during the interview or at a later stage (but before submission). Visitors who were willing to be interviewed were then asked to sign a consent form, stating the aims of the project, how their data would be used, and a contact for further queries or complaints. The consent form would also required visitors to indicate whether or not they would be happy for their interview to be audio recorded and, if relevant, whether any photographs (either taken by them or featuring them) could be used within the research (see Appendices). In preparation for the fieldwork component of the study, an ethical approval application was submitted to the University of Kent and was subsequently granted. This application was also authorised by my institutional supervisor Xerxes Mazda and complied with the British Museum's confidentiality procedures as outlined in the 'Collaborative Doctoral Award Studentship Agreement'.

As the exhibitions' exit interviews were short, only verbal consent was sought from these informants (in keeping with the British Museum's internal procedures). For the more structured and off-site interviews, I provided a consent form and an Information Sheet (see Appendices), the contents of which I explained prior to commencing the interview. Whether communicated verbally or in written form, each interviewee was told that their participation was voluntary and they could therefore opt out at any time; that their identity would be kept confidential; and that the audio recording was for transcription purposes only. To ensure anonymity, information which may identify the informant (such as their name, job title, and place of worship) was omitted. Participants were therefore allocated pseudonyms. However, for participants in official roles (such as museum staff or senior religious leaders) I asked whether they would be happy to be named or remain anonymous.

For the sake of full disclosure, I stated my role and the nature of my research when participating in any museum activity (whether organised by the British Museum or by an external party). However, to ensure I did not influence informants, I avoided raising the subject of religion and instead described my research as being about visitors' experiences. The majority of my empirical work took place in the public museum spaces. I also conducted a small number of interviews in other museums (with staff) and at the homes of informants I had met previously. The research's subject matter often led participants to reflect on particularly emotional experiences, such as bereavement. I therefore ensured my participants were comfortable with sharing such information and was respectful of their desire to stop, withdraw or continue.

## Summary

This chapter has presented the methodological framework in order to address the research question: How do visitors, objects and divine/supernatural beings engage in museum spaces? In proposing qualitative research which employs features from ANT, I reject a prescriptive approach and instead adopt a descriptive and more open framework to explore the field. Addressing the weaknesses discussed around outcome-based evaluations in museum visitor studies, I therefore approach this research with the objective not to anticipate what I will find.

As previously mentioned, ANT is a set of tools to explore interactions. In developing my methodology I have adapted many of these tools so they will apply to the specifics of my research field site. These modifications form a customised version of ANT which will continue to change throughout the research. Applying ANT to a methodological framework also raises important questions about how particular actors operate, such as the divine. The methodology therefore provides another opportunity to develop my response to the research question in terms of what actors are present and what they do.

## part two: FINDINGS

The following chapters present studies of actors from my empirical research at the British Museum, paying particular attention to those actors that facilitated and inhibited experiences of the divine. These ranged from material non-human elements such as individual exhibits and assemblages of objects (including texts), to immaterial non-human actors including sounds and (absent) scents. However, the human entities were also of note, whether it was due to their speech acts or their physical presence. As argued, studies concerning museum visitors often describe the museum visit as shaped by a combination of two interpretative frames: the visitors' pre-existing sensibilities and the intentions of the museum staff. In the coming chapters I present how non-human entities are also embroiled in the emergence of agency and, at times, perform in ways that are contrary to how the museum staff and even the visitor expected.

The following two chapters use a combination of extracts from interviews and field notes to examine the actors at the exhibitions *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (2011) and *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam* (2012).<sup>55</sup> Christian and Islamic artefacts were the focus of these two exhibitions, as part of an exploration into the religions' respective pilgrimage traditions. These temporary shows, therefore, presented three key opportunities; firstly, to discover how visitors who had a religious connection to the objects/content experienced the exhibits in the museum; secondly, to study the interactions of visitors who had no religious connection to the displayed objects; and thirdly, to observe how these visitors encountered one another. The subsequent chapter explores the actors on the tours that visit the British Museum's 'biblical archaeology', which were led by guides from religious organisations. These tours did not feature artefacts with any sacred salience for the tour attendees. Instead, the religious texts that they brought with them presented the potential for a divine connection. The tours also demonstrated a different social structure, in that the groups were predominately composed of people from the same faith. Tour guides' selections, guided by the Bible, generated a shared interpretative framework for encountering the displayed objects and the divine.

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<sup>55</sup> Pseudonyms are used in order to maintain the anonymity of my informants.

Taking a holistic approach, each chapter within this section considers the embodied, sensory, social and emotional experience of visitors' interactions with objects. In doing so, I query how divine encounters are affected by a range of material actors, which go beyond those objects that are considered components within religious practices. As the findings will demonstrate, visitors' experiences were composed of networks of numerous material and immaterial actors. These included seemingly less significant elements such as wooden benches and overheard comments uttered by visitors. By identifying a diverse range of actors to follow, I illustrate the varied and sometimes contradictory ways they perform within the network. For instance, did the glass case prevent or permit visitors venerating the objects? Or what affect did wearing headsets have on the tour attendees? Through identifying these entities, these chapters consider how particular actors facilitated divine connections, acted as obstacles, became pollutants or enhanced sacred experiences. Finally, as these chapters progress, connections will be drawn between the exhibitions and the tours in order to provide a more detailed picture of the interactions within the museum.

## chapter five: TREASURES OF HEAVEN



Figure 2: Reliquaries in cases (Trustees of the British Museum, 2011a)

The analysis of my findings will begin with an investigation of interactions that took place at the exhibition *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe* (23 June - 9 October 2011).<sup>56</sup> As this section will explore, the presence of relics and the associated acts of veneration provided the makings of multiple networks in which visitors, museum exhibits and divine beings could potentially engage. Central to many of these interactions were visibility, physical proximity and the visitors' knowledge, beliefs and past experiences of relics and reliquaries (see Figure 2).

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<sup>56</sup> Prior to coming to the British Museum, the exhibition was shown at The Cleveland Museum of Art and The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore (USA), with a slightly different collection in each.

The physical presence of the relics and the visitors enabled me to note observable behaviours, such as bowing, crossing oneself and touching of display cases, which led me to identify a number of key actors. The connections formed through these gestures of contact widened my network of analysis to include often ignored and seemingly mundane actors, such as the glass display cases and the objects visitors brought with them, including items they wore and the gifts they purchased in the exhibition shop. Similarly, embodied responses that were visible to me were also observable to others. How visitors responded to one another provided more actors and activities to follow. Other entities which affected devotional interactions included the labels and panels, and even the number of objects displayed.

By focusing on a variety of actors and their corresponding actions, I will seek to answer two questions. First, how did visitors engage with sacred presences in the exhibition and, if a divine encounter was not possible, why not? The second question is two-fold. Firstly, can an exhibition form the conditions to evoke a connection to the divine, and secondly, how can a divine encounter withstand the change of environment, from a place of worship to a museum gallery? Christian relics are bound within networks of veneration. The practice of venerating relics, in the medieval period and today, involves devotees praying to saints (or other holy figures) in order that the intercessor will pass on their prayer to God. Physical proximity to the holy relic is an essential component of the ritual. Thus, this chapter will demonstrate how the materiality of the relics and the exhibition space, together with the visitors' bodies, played central roles in the interactions observed.

### **Setting the scene**

The British Museum's exhibition, *Treasures of Heaven*, or *Treasures* by way of an abbreviation, was promoted as the second of a series of three exhibitions, which shared the theme of pilgrimage, entitled 'Spiritual Journeys'. The triad of exhibitions all took place in the same space, the renowned Reading Room. For *Treasures*, the Room's gold-edged rotunda with temporary dividing walls of dark blues, greys and reds were strategically utilised to evoke a nave-like space. Although the interior shell of the room, in particular the ceiling, remained a constant throughout the exhibition series, the Room's resemblance to a cathedral felt considerably appropriate and was frequently praised by visitors. Lighting and sound were equally important in creating a medieval *mise-en-scène*. With 12<sup>th</sup> century chanting and carpeted floors, the Reading Room provided a space of quiet and respite from the noisy and chaotic museum and city. Equally, a myriad of spotlights illuminated the exhibits and produced an immersive darkness in homage to the candlelit medieval churches and homes in which these objects once resided. The exhibition featured, as its title suggests, relics of holy figures in the form of their bodily remains. However, as was the practice in the medieval period, relics were seldom on view and were instead displayed (usually) in elaborately decorated reliquaries, which took the form of crosses, altars, statues and caskets. Together with examples of pilgrim badges and flasks, *Treasures* told the story of the rise and fall of Christian

relics in Europe and of the individuals and institutions who prized these fragile fragments. *Treasures* brought together reliquaries and relics from over forty institutions across the world, including museums, churches, private collections and the Vatican. Through the exhibition's nine broadly chronological sections, starting from Christianity's classical roots to the Protestant Reformation, the role these devotional objects played as political, economic and spiritual currency was explored.



Figure 3: Saint Baudime reliquary (Trustees of the British Museum, 2011b)

The first object visitors to the exhibition encountered was the gleaming bust of Saint Baudime (see Figure 3). In his outstretched hand, the Saint gripped a cone-shaped receptacle which once held a small phial of blood. The accompanying panel declared that “His intense gaze is intended to make a powerful impact on the viewer”, as part reference to the medieval Christian response and part instruction to the visitor. According to the exhibition's Project Curator Anna Harnden, *Treasures* was not simply a bringing together of medieval relics and

their adorned containers.<sup>57</sup> The exhibition was about understanding the mindset of the devotee who lived during the Middle Ages. To borrow Morgan's (2005) term, the ambitions of this exhibition were to deconstruct the 'sacred gaze', to explore how and what people believed, and through the immersive design, try to get a sense of what it may have felt to have seen these objects in a devotional space. The exhibition provided a creative mix of methods to view the inner sanctum of the reliquaries, from video and photography to medieval woodcuts and x-ray scans. *Treasures* did not dwell on the relics' authenticity. Instead the labels and panels framed the relics' histories in accordance to certain legends and beliefs. In the exhibition's final section, entitled 'Beyond the Middle Ages', were objects associated with the debunking of relics and veneration. Here the exhibition made a stylistic break from the dark and Gothic-style tones in reference to the 'whitewashing' of churches, and the authenticity question was raised through the words of John Calvin and Martin Luther. Finally the visitor was left with a slideshow of images showing modern forms of veneration, which included memorials to the war dead, Elvis Presley's grave in Graceland and recent photographs of Catholic relic devotion.

### Bone relic of Saint Blaise



Figure 4: Saint Blaise reliquary (BriFili Stating 2011)

To begin I will explore a number of interactions around one of the exhibited objects; a relic encased within a reliquary. The diffusion of saints' relics, beginning in the medieval period, created a far-reaching network of links to the saints, and thus to God, through their tangible

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<sup>57</sup> Interviewed 5 August 2011.

remains. As items of sacredness and preciousness, many of these fragments have survived to this day and their presence continues to evoke a range of emotional, intellectual and spiritual responses. A number of objects work to maintain the relics' 'power'. These usually include the relics' label, that often names the saint, and the reliquary, which frequently describes a scene from the saint's life or death. For those who venerate, these objects collectively connect the relic to the Saint who is both of this earth and in heaven.

The relic of Saint Blaise (1260) was in a section called 'Speaking Reliquaries'. These objects included reliquaries that were shaped to resemble the body part of the relic inside. Amongst the objects in the form of busts, arms and ribs was a reliquary in the shape of a foot which, as the labels stated, held a bone fragment of Saint Blaise behind a rock crystal window (see

Figure 4). As with many reliquaries, the area containing the relic was the focal point of the object. The accompanying labels also pointed out an engraving of a Bishop on the gilded copper stump of the ankle, which the label stated was "almost certainly intended to represent Saint Blaise".

Saint Blaise was believed to be a fourth century Armenian Bishop who was possibly martyred by Romans. His cult became widespread throughout Europe from the eighth century and he still remains a popular Saint for many with a feast day on 3<sup>rd</sup> February (Farmer 2004). Today, his relics are found across the world. For example, in an interview with a Greek Orthodox Parish Priest, who visited the exhibition with an Orthodox Bishop, he informed me that he had a relic of Saint Blaise in the altar of his church in America. Encountering another relic of the same Saint at the British Museum was particularly poignant for him. Describing his relationship with the Saint's relics, he exclaimed: "[Blaise is] a part of my life. I see him every day and I kiss his relics every day... so to see him like this and to find out how many people in the West love Saint Blaise is fantastic." I observed the Bishop and Priest, dressed in Eastern Orthodox attire with long black cassocks and large cross pendants, at the foot reliquary. After walking around the case, the Bishop crossed himself and then touched the crucifix resting on his chest. It appeared a very quick and seemingly natural movement. As the Bishop moved to exit the room, he again, in a fluid motion, quickly crossed his chest. The presence of the reliquary prompted this embodied and habituated response. The Bishop later explained that they venerated "as much as they could" in the exhibition space and, while they were disappointed not to be able to touch the relics, performing other rituals were still evidently possible. Although only one relic in the exhibition was attributed to Saint Blaise, the Saint was also depicted on a portable altar and the church and treasury bearing his name were cited in two other labels. The accumulation of these connections was important to the Priest as they made the reach and significance of the Saint's cult visible. The foot relic on display in the exhibition linked not only to the story of Blaise's martyrdom but also to the emotions, stories, people and prayers the Priest experienced with the relic in his church's altar. Holding his cross-shaped pendant that contained the relics of two other saints, he told me: "This is a part of

their body. That's not all of them, because they have a soul which is up in paradise with Christ, but their bodies also are a part of them, it's not less than them." Thus, whilst fragmentary in the corporeal sense, each relic provided a connection to the complete Saint—body and soul—two entities which are inextricably linked in the practice of veneration.

In religious rituals, habituated practices strengthen the bonds within networks of interaction, enabling connections to endure over time. The maintenance of rituals requires adaptation, which may create new opportunities for engagement while preventing and problematising others (such as direct touch). The reliquaries (and their contents) were able to be many things for many people: a work of art, an example of craftsmanship, and an object of curiosity. Yet their physical presence in a space which enabled visitors to identify and spend time with them still allowed some visitors, with the desire and knowledge of the Saint, to engage with the divine actors themselves. The Priest had to modify how he physically and emotionally interacted with the relic in the exhibition to make a connection. And yet, the relic and reliquary also underwent modifications in terms of how they were presented. Exhibited within display cases and accompanied by labels that described the saints and the material properties of the artefacts, the displays added new elements to these religious objects which had the potential to both hinder and enhance devotional engagements.

Pope Benedict XVI (2010: 102) addressed the matter of veneration at a lecture in 2009. Citing the 8<sup>th</sup> century Syrian monk John Damascene, the pontiff stated that saints and the Virgin Mary:

have made themselves similar to God by their own will; and by God's presence in them, and his help, they are really called gods..., not by their nature, but by contingency, just as the red-hot iron is called fire, not by its nature, but by contingency and its participation in the fire. He says in fact: you shall be holy, because I am Holy (cf. Lv 19: 2).

The fire analogy also applies to the chains of actors that encompass contact relics. The relic (primary or contact) is not intrinsically holy. Rather, its sacred quality is brought about through the objects' active participation and relationship with the divine. For this reason, argued the Pope (2010: 102), "the Christian Saints, having become partakers of the Resurrection of Christ, cannot be considered simply 'dead'". In other words, the saints' engagement with the divine allows them to continue to exist as mediators between the devotee and God. The complexities around this relationship has led to misunderstandings about the role of materiality and the divine, as the practice of veneration can (to the spectator) appear to contradict the idea that "god is uncircumscribable" (Maniura 2011: 55). The remarks made by visitors who misread this relationship, manifested itself as confusion, rejection, cynicism and amusement, as will be discussed. Yet, even when no remarks were voiced, there were concerns amongst some Catholic and Orthodox visitors that such misinterpretations may be taking place.

The anatomical appearance of the so-called ‘speaking reliquaries’ drew a lot of attention as objects of religious significance, aesthetic beauty and curious appeal (and sometimes all three). While the American Parish Priest shared a strong and stable actor-network with the Saint’s relics (which the exhibition helped to enhance), other networks were far weaker. A Catholic mother from Yorkshire who came with her daughter and husband admitted that they laughed when they saw the reliquary of Saint Blaise, which they knew was the Patron Saint of Bradford but, the mother declared, “Bradford has no relevance to the Saint’s foot here”. Yet what they did not consider (or know) was that until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wool workers from the mills would parade through the streets of Bradford in the name of Saint Blaise, as the Saint died on iron combs and was, consequently, named the patron saint of wool combers (Vince 2001). Visitors’ interactions with the objects were, therefore, strongly influenced by their previous knowledge and experiences.<sup>58</sup>

## The Mandylion



Figure 5: The Mandylion  
(Telegraph 2011a)



Figure 6: The Mandylion in the exhibition  
(Trustees of the British Museum 2011c)

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<sup>58</sup> I also witnessed a visitor (who described herself as Buddhist) hold her shoe to the case in order to compare her foot size with the reliquary. The woman’s shoe, therefore, provided a way of relating to the reliquary in the absence of a religious affiliation.

One object which visitors spent considerable amounts of time with was the Mandylion, also known as the Image of Edessa or the Holy Cloth (Figure 5 and Figure 6), which was on loan from the Vatican. Presented and described by the curators as the exhibition's "grand finale", the Mandylion performed a number of narrative functions. The object's label told the Byzantine legend of when the royal artist to King Abgar of Edessa (Urfa in modern Turkey) went to the Holy Land (Finaldi 2000). There he met Christ; yet unable to paint his likeness, Christ gave the artist a cloth that had touched his own face. Miraculously, the cloth had retained the image of Christ's face which, on return to Edessa, cured Abgar of leprosy and arthritis. The barely visible image of Christ, which is considered as both a relic and an icon, is also referred to as an, in Greek, 'acheiropoieton' meaning "not made by human hand" (Finaldi 2000). However, it is said that in the centuries following, the cloth was painted with the face of Christ to preserve the original impression. Following on from the white-walled section on the Reformation, the Mandylion exemplified the continuity of relic and icon veneration as its bejewelled frame dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century and thus followed the Reformation.

A Catholic visitor, who was particularly affected by the Mandylion, explained that the provenance of the relic – as indicated on the label – impacted on how he related to the object, stating that the name of the Vatican acted "like a seal of approval". The association of the Vatican, as mentioned on the label (written "Sacrestia Pontificia, Vatican City"), gave an aura of credibility and significance to the object, as something of religious and cultural importance. As the exhibition's Project Curator, Anna Harnden, stated in a lecture, the Mandylion was "perhaps one of the most important objects in the world *if* it is what it claims". And if the Mandylion was in fact the cloth that touched Christ's face and retained his image, would the Vatican loan this precious and prized object to a museum? For Father Julian, a local Catholic Priest, the presence of the Mandylion in the British Museum (as opposed to a traditional devotional space) suggested that the Vatican did not wholly invest in the object's claims. The reference to the Vatican on the label therefore operated in two opposing ways, verifying the object for one visitor and raising doubts in another.

For Father Julian the relics associated with Christ were less powerful than the corporeal remains of martyred saints. The Priest explained that as Christ's blood is made present during the Eucharist (through the process of transubstantiation), the (dubious) relics of Christ in the exhibition held less significance. He explained:

The Blessed Sacrament is the true body of Christ in our belief so we don't need a bit of fingernail clipping because you're actually able to get access to the body of Christ in an entirely different manner... There is precious blood on the altar every day, in a different form, but it is the same stuff, from our point of view, though it doesn't taste like blood, thankfully.

For those who believe in the legitimacy of transubstantiation, such as the Priest here, the sacrament escapes questions of authenticity as it is transformed.<sup>59</sup> The process of transformation essentially authenticates the bread and wine as being the blood and body of Christ. In contrast, Father Julian expressed feelings of doubt around the relics such as the True Cross, the Holy Thorn and the Mandylion especially, as the Priest explained, their discoveries are not mentioned in a divinely-inspired text. For Father Julian, the practice of performing the Eucharist created a much stronger and more valid sacred connection between Christ and the sacrament. Credibility, therefore, depended on a much larger network of communal and institutional acceptance. In addition to being made ‘without human hands’, the Mandylion was also believed to possess the ability to replicate itself when other materials were laid over it (Bagnoli, et al. 2011). While it is likely that the Vatican’s Mandylion is a replica of sorts, the object label made no mention of the Mandylion’s self-replicating power or whether it was *the* cloth that touched Christ. Instead it qualified the object’s claim to Christ as “believed to be”, despite the fact that many Orthodox visitors *still* believe in the divine provenance of the Mandylion be it original or a miraculous replica.

The Mandylion’s connection to the Vatican made encountering the object particularly special for some visitors. In light of this, Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster Cathedral, urged readers of the *Catholic Herald* to visit the exhibition to see the Mandylion which, according to the Archbishop, “will never leave the Vatican again” (Barrett and Obordo 2011). Yet, according to two Orthodox visitors, the museum failed to state explicitly the presence of the Mandylion in the marketing of the exhibition. The two visitors stated that the Mandylion should have drawn great crowds of Orthodox visitors just to see that object.<sup>60</sup> However, the fact that the Mandylion was one of many objects in the exhibition and not even mentioned on the main posters demonstrated a mismatch between what the curators and marketing staff understood as the exhibition’s ‘star’ objects and what particular religious groups saw as most significant.

By contrast, for some visitors, not knowing what was in the exhibition proved an unanticipated positive. I observed a Catholic Brother from South Africa at the Mandylion. Standing before the object, he read the label, closely peered into the eyes of Christ, bowed very slightly and then crossed himself. The Brother, who admitted to having “one foot in Orthodoxy” confessed his surprise at seeing the Mandylion in the museum:

There are works that I have looked at in books for years and suddenly to see them... The Mandylion, I mean I’ve only seen pictures of that and I never thought it would leave Rome and there it is! Oh, wow!

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<sup>59</sup> The concept of transubstantiation, when the bread and wine transform to the blood and flesh of Christ, is based on an interpretation of the Last Supper in the New Testament.

<sup>60</sup> The exhibition, as stated, was rarely crowded. Only 8% of visitors had to queue to enter according to the MHM report for *Treasures* (2011).

The Brother's prior knowledge of the Mandylion made his encounter particularly emotional and, so, he sat on the bench facing the image "just to be around it, with it, look at it, absorb it, [and] feel it". The bench enabled such extended periods of interaction through the act of sitting. Other Orthodox visitors stood close to the object, holding and reading from prayer books. These visitors could not perform the same rituals as they would in a place of worship. Nevertheless, the presence of the Mandylion, the prayers and their physical devotional acts enabled a sacred connection to occur in the museum, albeit in a modified manner. The object's impact was partly due to the fact that the image of Christ's face conformed to how many viewers' envisage Christ to look. As Morgan (1998: 35) asserts in regard to images of Christ, "The match between mental and visual likeness is a striking experience of recognition". What Christ looks like is made up of an accumulation of images. Thus not all portrayals are accepted as accurate representations. However, the category is usually sufficiently pliable to allow for small variations. And so, whilst the murkiness of the Mandylion's painted cloth made the image of Christ difficult to relate to for some visitors (that I spoke to), for others the face exhibited enough recognisable features to create that emotional and sacred connection.<sup>61</sup>

A Church of England Bishop, whom I observed sitting at the Mandylion for some time, explained his desire to put aside his scholarly stance (as a medievalist) and consider the Mandylion as an authentic relic:

I suppose I wanted to open myself to the possibility that it is genuine, while academically thinking that probably that wouldn't be the case, but it wouldn't be a question that you could actually resolve in a scholarly way... I just wanted to open myself spiritually to the possibility and thinking, 'And then what?' How do I want to pray? What sort of person do I want to be if I am three-feet away from something which was laid over the sweaty face of Jesus Christ and retained his image?... I just felt it would be, for me, it would have been wrong at some point in the exhibition not to ask that 'what if' question.

This ability to wonder and speculate was partly aided by the fact that the Mandylion's credibility was neither queried nor debunked in the accompanying label. Discussing his experience further, I asked the Bishop whether he would have responded differently if the Mandylion was in a place of worship. "I think the environment would have made it easier to continue with the spiritual contemplation", he said. Expanding on this, he explained:

You're very conscious that there are other people around you and you've got to allow them their reaction as well. If I suddenly wanted to fall to my knees, this would be quite

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<sup>61</sup> Morgan (1998: 35) describes the typical image of Christ as "almost invariably slender, solemn, emotionally subdued, inwardly absorbed, bearded, and ascetic... the long, slender nose and the prominent, almond shaped eyes are reminiscent of Christ's representation in early Byzantine icons".

awkward and embarrassing... So yes, there is a boundary there that I felt I need to stay within.

The presence of museum visitors (and the possibility of causing embarrassment) impeded the Church of England Bishop's interaction with the relic. A number of my informants also mentioned the potential of embarrassing others or oneself by performing the physical gestures of veneration. In conversation with a Russian Orthodox Christian, she explained that ordinarily she would kneel before an object such as the Mandylion, but in the museum she was "not that brave", so stood instead. In the exhibition, religious visitors often adjusted, toned down, or abandoned the physical acts of veneration due to the public nature of the space. Some of these visitors also expressed feeling uneasy about prostrating in a site that was not consecrated. The location and surroundings, thus, transformed how visitors physically interacted with the objects, which, as the Bishop suggested, changed the nature and, sometimes, the efficacy of visitors' devotional acts.

### **Audible utterances**

The presence of religious artefacts in museums presents a very different network to objects located within traditionally devotional sites. One key point of distinction is the possibility of seeing and hearing alternative and non-devotional forms of engagement. With the exhibition focusing on a timeframe and religion, which for many visitors felt distant and alien, it was not unusual to hear exhibition attendees voicing opinions that seemed judgemental and critical of veneration. Consequently, a number of my religious interviewees felt that performing religious rituals in the museum may provoke similar criticism. This led some Catholic and Orthodox visitors to refrain from interacting with objects in a devotional manner. The visibility of devotional acts, therefore, led to certain visitors feeling a heightened sensitivity about performing the rituals in the public museum. Such sounds were made more audible by particular actors in the space such as the carpet, which muffled footsteps and the music, which installed a peaceful atmosphere.

The engagements I witnessed at *Treasures* were as evident to other visitors as they were to me. Whether a visitor was kneeling to pray, making a rather loud comment or spending a considerable time in front of an object, if I noticed it, so could others. Visitors' audible utterances, in particular, had an effect on multiple visitor-object engagements. Through my analysis of the exhibition, it became evident that overheard comments were a significant actor. Overheard remarks ranged from personal conversations which bore no relationship to the exhibition, reading of labels, descriptions of the objects, preferences, sympathetic or critical remarks about medieval rituals and stories, and doubts regarding the authenticity of

the objects themselves.<sup>62</sup> The majority of remarks were made between visitors who came together, while a small number were said to strangers or just to themselves. Wallbott and Scherer (1989) suggest that participants in interviews may be less inclined to provide an honest account of the experiences and opinions when they are asked by a researcher, especially if the response was to reflect badly on them. Overheard comments, in comparison, are often less filtered particularly when the utterer is unaware that their utterances are audible to strangers.

Some of the more disputed relics produced a particularly strong (and audible) response in visitors. Such objects included the reliquary which, according to the label, once held the Virgin Mary's breast milk and others associated with Christ and the Apostles. Although the labels avoided doubting or validating the relics in the exhibition, the presence of particular names, dates and descriptions prompted a plethora of responses from humorous anecdotes to outright disapproval. The audible nature of the remarks ensured that the personal and private thoughts of particular visitors became public, albeit to a few more visitors.<sup>63</sup>

One such comment was heard by a Catholic family. The remark was made by a male visitor responding to a label for the Epitaph of Ursinianus, which mentioned the practice of being buried close to a saint's shrine as a way to increase one's chances of going to heaven. "Oh, so they didn't bother to be faithful during their lives?", they heard the visitor say. The father, Jonathan, was clearly offended by what he referred to as "Protestant" judgements and attributed this response to an animosity stemming from the Reformation.<sup>64</sup> Jonathan's wife, Eva, also recalled a visitor's remark that Medieval Christians prayed to the saints because they thought God was too holy to approach. For Jonathan and Eva, the overheard visitors lacked the connections to understand how saints were divinely positioned and the implication of physical proximity between the devotee and relic. Similarly, when visitors, who practised relic veneration, raised the issue of the relics' authenticity it was usually in defence of other people's doubts and suspicions. Catholic and Eastern Orthodox visitors were keen to clarify the functions of material objects in their religious practices, as channels to the divine and not the targets. A Catholic visitor construed the quiet manner in which visitors conducted themselves as a sign that they "felt something". Although the quietude also meant that she

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<sup>62</sup> Utterances between visitors were also affected by the devotional practices of strangers. For example, a female visitor chastised her partner for talking loudly by the Mandyion where Alina stood silently venerated.

<sup>63</sup> Other overheard comments included a man exclaiming, "That's bizarre!" in regard to the image of a levitating head depicted on a casket. He later remarked upon a different relic as "more believable". A woman inspecting a reliquary also joked that "Jesus would be turning in his grave at some of these things. I'm sure he wouldn't mind me saying that."

<sup>64</sup> Some visitors also expect that museums, such as the British Museum, will adhere to 'enlightened' principles and thus encourage rational and scientific interpretations.

caught a woman say that the relics were “rubbish”. Like Jonathan, the Catholic visitor assumed that the people she overheard did not practice relic veneration so could appreciate “only the art but not the meaning behind it... [but] I wasn’t going to turn around and say to her, ‘I think it’s for real’”.<sup>65</sup> The voicing of conflicting and insensitive comments are less likely to occur in places of worship, and so such overheard remarks in the museum became more prominent.

The absence and presence of visitors’ voices also affected the exhibition’s ambience. Orthodox visitor, Leona told me that she found it particularly difficult to venerate in the museum due to the lack of “a spiritual atmosphere”. In sites of devotion, many actors constitute what can be deemed as a ‘spiritual’ soundscape, but for Leona, the sounds of museum visitors (whom, she presumed, were mostly non-venerators) were distractions. She explained:

the majority [of visitors] seem to be from a Christian background actually but don’t appear to be practising or believing Christians. I would say they’re probably more.... indifferent, really. You can tell by the nature of the discussion and so on. It does distress me... when there are people who are acting in a very kind of disrespectful way towards the objects. I personally find that seriously impedes my positive experience of the whole thing.

Reflecting on her multiple visits to the exhibition, Leona concluded, “that’s what happens if you have sacred things in an exhibition”. For Leona, the other visitors (from non-Catholic and Orthodox backgrounds) were not only distractions that impeded her ability to venerate, but also presented a threat to the object and their associated holy figure. Charlotte, a Catholic visitor, also perceived the presence of people outside of her faith as potential threats. To counter visitors’ negative thoughts, Charlotte recited a few prayers in order “to create a positivity in the space”. In our subsequent interview, she expressed a concern about the potential for satanic practices (having once witnessed the evidence of “devil worship” on a grave). Furthermore, she worried that visitors might dismiss the practices as “mumbo jumbo”. The issue of insulting the object and its associated holy figure was raised at The Council of Nicaea in 787 where it was asked, “Who does not know that when an image is dishonoured the insult also applies to the person who is depicted?” (Brubaker 1999: 58). In this sense, the offended devotee may feel that they are insulted on *behalf* of the represented figure. Yet, in the same vein, visitors may also feel the very practice of saint and relic veneration is insulting to God. In both scenarios, the visitor is not only the one who is offended; they are also offended on behalf of the holy figure represented by the relic or icon.

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<sup>65</sup> Although these visitors presumed that the sounds of laughing and derogative comments came from non-Catholic and Orthodox visitors, I met a small number of Catholic visitors who were very sceptical of the practice of relic veneration. One Catholic visitor described some of the stories associated with the relics as so farfetched that they were “just hilarious”. And so, whilst the ‘overhearers’ interpreted these conflicting responses as signs of difference and opposition, they in fact revealed a diversity (and disagreement) of attitudes within the Catholic and Orthodox audiences.

Visitors, who venerated relics as part of their religious practices, may well have felt particularly sensitive by the time they came to my exit interview questions. As an exhibition in England, a country which experienced Reformation and the subsequent vilifying of such practices, it was unsurprising that the majority of interviewees, who discussed veneration, felt they had to clarify what it meant in order to counter the criticisms displayed in the final section of the exhibition.<sup>66</sup> Thus, how and in what order associations and connections are formed are significant for the object engagements themselves, but also in terms of how the interviewees responded to my questions.

Overhearing conversations was not always a negative experience. The museum exhibition attracted a wide range of visitors, all with different experiences and levels of knowledge on the subject. Eleanor, who converted to Islam, confessed that she was “very ill-informed” about saints and relics. Hearing other people talk about the objects and saints thereby added to her understanding of relics as an ongoing tradition. She stated:

I think there were some people there that were quite serious Christians that were actually coming to see them for that reason... They were talking about what this is and have you heard of this story and this is from here.

These overheard conversations not only highlighted Eleanor’s lack of knowledge but provided insights into the relics’ (religious) networks for other visitors. Moreover, they revealed that even a museum can become a site of encounter with religious interactions. A Catholic nun also explained the positive impact of seeing other people engaging with the exhibition content, stating: “when you enjoy something, you like to have other people talking about it and appreciating it. It’s not something that is only for me and those who are Christian.” Another nun, from a different convent, also commented upon the number of people in the exhibition discussing the objects and taking notes. Knowing that these visitors also had to pay to enter was perceived, by the nun, as further confirmation that the objects were valued. The chance to observe and overhear people, outside of the Catholic and Orthodox faiths, positively affected the nuns’ experiences of the exhibition. Again, such activities are less likely in places of worship (especially for the nuns who live in convents), and so the museum visit provided a rare opportunity to witness the responses of others.

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<sup>66</sup> As discussed, the origin and early history of the British Museum fostered dematerialised relationships with its objects. This reflected the dematerialised relationship Protestant denominations held with the divine, which was largely defined in opposition to the Catholic practices that involved material forms. Although it is unlikely that visitors considered these historical influences during their visits, the assumption that a hands-off Protestant-rationalist gaze is the standard way to engage with the objects demonstrates how much these lenses come to define how visitors perceive a so-called ‘secular’ institution such as the British Museum.

The presence of overheard remarks demonstrated a number of key factors within the exhibition network. The overhearing of comments cannot be controlled by the museum. In what is essentially a highly choreographed and stylised environment, the visitors are the wild card. The exhibition was designed to be a quiet, contemplative space with a soundtrack of gentle monastic chants and carpeted floors that muffled the sounds of footsteps. These elements encouraged the majority of visitors to engage quietly, although not everybody behaved in the same way.<sup>67</sup> The fact that this was, on the whole, a quiet exhibition only drew more attention to the visitors' voices. The museum was also unable to manage the content of the audible remarks, despite the fact that their reception may have had a greater impact than the label text. The overheard comments also illustrated the multi-sensory nature of engagements. Encounters with relics are frequently accompanied by sounds which punctuate and give meaning to the interaction. Such sounds may include prayers, singing and the rattling chains of a thurible (incense burner) which collectively leave very few opportunities to overhear comments from members of the congregation. Also, because church congregations usually share the same beliefs, practices and deference to the holy figures and traditions, individuals are less likely to voice opinions that may be deemed as insensitive or insulting to others. However, in places of worship that also attract tourists, a similar clash of (voiced) interests and beliefs may arise as Myra Shackley (2001: 35) states:

the proper treatment of sacred places is a matter of respect, not always enforceable by management and sometimes complicated by an extensive cultural distance between the function and the purpose of the site and the background of the visitors.

The visitors' views and experiences, therefore, played a crucial role in terms of what they uttered and how they interpreted the utterances of others. For some visitors the sensorial distinctiveness between the museum and the traditional sites of worship heightened the points of difference in their engagements with the objects. And yet, the aural experience, also had the potential to evoke certain similarities between the exhibition and sites of devotion as they shared many of the same actors.

With the pervasiveness of personal music devices, museum audio guides and ambient in-gallery soundtracks, it is easy to forget the impact of hearing other people in museums. Visitor evaluations and studies often focus on the sounds museums provide, as opposed to the sounds that visitors make and respond to. By way of comparison, the British Museum exhibition *Grayson Perry: The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* used no music. Unlike the conventions that installed quietude within the Reading Room during the period *Treasures* was

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<sup>67</sup> The quietude was also due to the type of visitors who attended. MHM (2011) reported that the age profile of *Treasures* was much older than previous special exhibitions (37% over 60 years and only 7% under 20 years of age). I also observed many visitors coming on their own. The lack of families and groups meant fewer conversations and thus less vocal activity.

on, the objects and labels (written in first-person) prompted lively discussions about the works and, due to the exhibition's informality and humour, there was often laughter. However, the laughter seemed to be with Perry (as the artist and curator) as opposed to being at his or the works' expense. The responses also seemed to echo Perry's own playful approach. At a shrine to Perry's teddy bear (Alan Measles), a daughter, standing with her father, remarked: "I don't feel he's mocking anything". This comment (or attitude) appeared to legitimatise the visitors' response. The sensitivities that existed at *Treasures* (due to personal affiliations to the subject matter) were not apparent at the *Grayson Perry* exhibition. Hence, for the majority of the visitors I spoke to at *Grayson Perry*, most felt comfortable finding the same humour that Perry installed in the exhibition. But on a practical sense, as there were more people talking at this exhibition, visitors were less likely to overhear individual comments .

### **Labels, panels and signs**

Museum exhibition teams spend a great deal of time and energy on panels and labels. Their size, design, placement, voice, complexity and word count are regularly debated. Some museum and art gallery staff even question whether they should be used at all. Falk (1992: 74) identifies two ways of reading labels. Either the visitors read labels to "confirm their own conceptual framework" or, if they lack the knowledge and skills, the labels can instead "determine an appropriate conceptual framework". Yet the label and panel are much more than conceptual or interpretative frames. Their material presence often directs the visitors' gaze, posture and location within the space, irrespective of whether the visitors process the information displayed. Panels and labels therefore help to shape the flow of visitors. In many instances, the length and complexity of the texts partially determine how much time visitors spend with the objects, whether it be through attraction or rejection. At *Treasures*, a number of cases displayed multiple labels, which not only distributed visitors around the exhibit (and reduced crowding), but also increased the amount of time visitors spent with one object. The labels often directed the visitors' gaze to the artefact by pointing out particular features, such as the name, symbol or depiction of a saint and where the relic was located. Panels and labels also prompted discussions amongst visitors, which, as previously discussed, were occasionally overheard.

Panels, which are much larger than labels, are usually used to introduce new topics and/or exhibition sections through the use of text, graphics and images. Their size and position gives them prominence and authority. It is not surprising, therefore, that the text is sometimes questioned and critiqued by visitors. A Greek Orthodox Bishop, who attended the exhibition with the Orthodox Parish Priest mentioned earlier, aired his objection to the references of worship in the past tense as written on a number of panels. Expanding on this, the Bishop stated that situating relic-related practices in the past may typify the attitude of many Christians in England, but not globally, stating that "the vast majority of Christians in the

world, Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians, do [venerate]... I mean we prayed in front of most of the reliquaries." A local Catholic priest also echoed this objection:

I just wish that sometimes people didn't put things in the past tense as though it didn't happen anymore, because I assure you it does happen. But I suppose the majority of people who don't come across this kind of thing in their regular worship [it is]... as though it's something to do with the past rather than the present.

The Bishop and Priest assumed that the museum staff approached the subject with a Protestant and/or secular bias and, thus, interpreted the practice of veneration as historical. Despite the presence of a small number of photographs and labels that referred to contemporary practices (which were easily missed), the majority of the exhibition was situated within the medieval period. A Muslim visitor, who I interviewed a year after the exhibition, came to this conclusion:

I know a lot of Christians but I don't know any who venerate in that way... I don't think many people do do it ... So I guess [*Treasures*] made me think of a time that no longer exists, which is why it was all the more interesting.

The combination of the visitor's lack of awareness (in regard to the continuing veneration of relics) and the fact that the majority of the labels and panels were written in the past tense led this visitor to leave the exhibition with the (upheld) belief that relics were no longer venerated. Anticipating such responses, the Orthodox Parish Priest suggested that the exhibition should include a panel by the exit listing Christian relics in local churches, in order to connect the exhibits to "real life" worship in London. In other words, the Priest wanted to make the networks of contemporary relic veneration visible. In reference to the latter, Hervieu-Leger's (2000: 125) notion of the "continuity of the lineage of believers" responds directly to this awareness of a larger community of devotees. If applying the principles of ANT to this idea of time, past and future acts of devotion are all contained within the present. Objections around the use of past-tense also touches upon the perception that objects in museums are dead or frozen, as previously discussed. The Bishop and Priest, therefore, felt it necessary for the museum to explicitly acknowledge contemporary veneration outside of the exhibition. By contrast, a church or pilgrimage site does not need to make this link as their relics are viewed as active elements in ongoing rituals.

A number of visitors commended the exhibition's (broadly) chronological approach for being easy to follow. However, the rationalist progression narrative (from the early medieval to the Reformation) suggests, according to Michel Serres (1995: 50), that time follows an 'irreversible course'. Therefore, "[i]nstead of condemning or excluding, one consigns a certain thing to antiquity, to archaism". A number of visitors, mostly from Protestant denominations, accepted and appreciated that these relics were part of their religious tradition's history and no longer a part of their current religious practices. This sentiment was suggested by one visitor who

muttered as exiting the exhibition “Thank God for Cromwell!”. For these visitors, relic veneration today was perceived as anachronistic. Gell asserts that anachronism is not about the association of “a gone by date” but today’s date and so assumes that time is one linear continuum (of progression), rather than accepting that time is multiple.

The entities within the exhibition that typified a museum network, such as the labels, interpretation and cases, were seen by some visitors as an assemblage of actors which contributed to the ‘museumification’ of the relics and reliquaries. Often used as a negative term, in this context, the ‘museumification’ was a welcomed act for it showed these objects as historicised and no longer part of ritual networks. An artist who visited the exhibition, who described herself as “a non-practising Christian”, explained her appreciation of the objects’ museum locale:

The bad thing is that the context isn’t there, but the good thing is that you can look at them as an object, just as an object... admire them in any way you like. They’ve been taken out of their context, but they can also be related to others from other areas, other eras, so from that point of view.... It’s a museum piece. We’re coming here to see a museum piece not a religious piece per se.

For this visitor, objects within religious institutions presented a rigid network which prevented her from relating to them in other ways. The relics’ presence in the museum, by contrast, allowed the visitor the flexibility to appreciate the reliquaries within different assemblages of objects and texts. But, as illustrated, the relics’ relocation does not necessarily mean they lose their identity as religious objects for everyone. Pre-visiting motivations, experiences and perceptions framed both religious and nonreligious encounters. A university lecturer (who described himself as a lapsed Catholic) explained that he is “conditioned” to get into the mindset of a devotee in a church as “you understand that that is the practice”, whilst he saw the museum as “a neutral canvas”. This visitor entered the museum with a mindset to engage with the objects detached from the religious rituals. However, as a lapsed Catholic we may also assume that the lecturer no longer had the desire to venerate. A frequent visitor to the British Museum (and paid member) held a similar view of the museum. Describing herself as “totally nonreligious and if anything hostile to any religion”, she explained:

As a non-Christian I’m not really susceptible to the kind of atmosphere a Christian may have found, but I thought it was a beautiful exhibition and certainly a solemn, thought provoking and everything one would hope from an exhibition of these kinds of works of art.

Again, the visitors’ pre-visiting networks (including their beliefs, motivations and experiences) framed and shaped how they conceived the relics. Although some visitors may have viewed the exhibits as historical works of art, the museum also held the potential to reveal moments of sacred interaction by facilitating devotional acts in those that practised relic veneration.

Most visitors come to exhibitions not to venerate, but to discover certain details about the artefacts such as where they were from, when they were made, and from what they were made. At *Treasures*, providing such information about the relics was problematic for two reasons. Firstly, this information was often not known (as the fragments were either too small or delicate to analyse). Secondly, should a test disprove the relic's material connection to a holy figure, it would potentially offend and upset a proportion of the museum's audience. Yet, it is often seen as the role of museums to provide these details about artefacts from a rational standpoint that is informed by scientific inquiry. Most of my informants did not mention the lack of details in the labelling. By the time the visitors had come to me, the majority had read the texts, understood the premise of medieval veneration and (if they had not already) realised that there are sensitivities around dating. The expectation and demand for museums to present the perceived 'truth' about relics was evident to a far greater extent on social media sites. In the lead up to the exhibition, British Museum staff posted a number of messages on the Museum's Facebook page (British Museum 2012) about the forthcoming exhibits. The comments, from visitors and non-visitors, ranged from "Wow - the British Museum officially thinks it has a Christian relic?" to "You seem to have taken up evangelism of late. I preferred it when you were a museum." Another Facebook user assumed that the British Museum's writings on relics were "tongue in cheek", and that the exhibition would be about faked relics in the Middle Ages.<sup>68</sup> A different poster expressed:

It isn't right for a museum to speak of religious mythology as if it's reality... it's a folk-mythological accretion that needs to be described - however 'sensitively' - as just another piece in the world's ridiculous tapestry of superstitious fantasy.

As an institution of authority and of (perceived) secular values, the museum's failure to expose the relics (and their corresponding beliefs) as bogus jarred with the role and response some individuals expected from the British Museum. Again, the perception that the museum is secular and removed from religious life was demonstrated. However, as is the nature of social media sites, there were also many comments that supported the British Museum's interpretation as well as one poster who asked, "why the past tense, this is a living religion?".

Labels and panels are significant actors within museum networks as they can, through text and images, link to many more entities. Exhibition labels are also perceived as one of the key conventions which set the museum apart from places of worship, despite the fact that many places of worship signpost and label their objects.<sup>69</sup> But labels also have a crucial role for relics

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<sup>68</sup> Authenticity was approached very differently at the British Museum's exhibition *Fake? The Art of Deception* (1990) which identified objects from the British Museum's collection that were known to be forgeries. The exhibition also included a panel on the carbon dating of the Turin Shroud (the object was not physically present).

<sup>69</sup> At the National Gallery exhibition *Devotion by Design: Italian Altarpieces before 1500* (6 July – 2

in that they can help to identify what saint the relic is affiliated to. Patron saints have different functions and to venerate a saint it is necessary to know their name. To not know who the relic belongs to may disrupt the chain of actors that connect the devotee to God. It was traditionally the function of the reliquary to identify the saints. However, the iconography and symbols of the medieval period are less familiar to today's audiences. The inscriptions can also be difficult to read. Thus, the label (whether it be designed by the exhibition team or written by a medieval craftsman) plays a crucial role in identifying the saint and thereby enabling a sacred connection to be made. For instance, a Russian Orthodox visitor explained that to find a relic of a saint that shared her own name was particularly special. However, a number of the exhibited reliquaries failed to provide this information. For some objects, this was due to the fact that the 'owner' was unknown, whilst in the case of reliquaries holding multiple relics, there were too many names to list on the limited label space. The opportunity to make such personal connections with particular saints were, consequently, lost. Discussing the labels, Leona (an Orthodox Christian) stated that she would have got "more out of [the objects] on a spiritual basis" if more information was made available. The labels and panels, therefore, affected visitors' ability to connect devotionally with the holy figures.

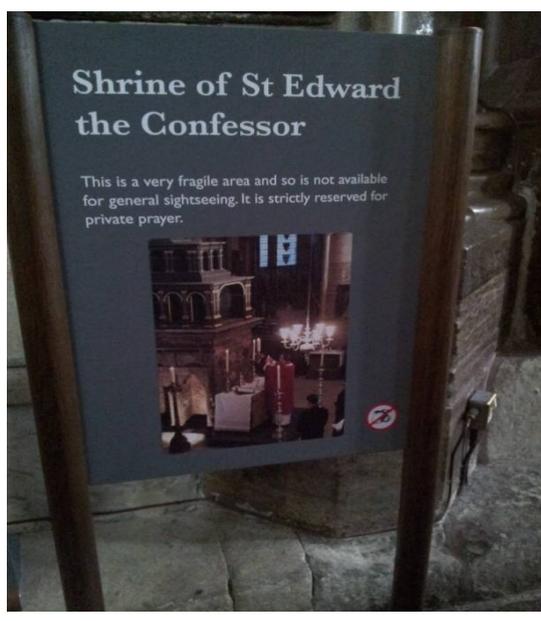


Figure 7: A sign outside the Shrine of Edward the Confessor, Westminster Abbey (Berns 2012a)



Figure 8: Signs (in waiting) at Canterbury Cathedral (Normann 2003)

October 2011), the labels were positioned away from the altarpieces to evoke the experience of a sixteenth century churchgoer. The altarpieces were also displayed alongside two (electric) candles and a crucifix to illustrate, as one label described, how the onlooker's eye was led down to the altar. Thus, the assemblage of sacramental objects and the displacement of the labels helped to simulate the material displays of a Renaissance church.

In a similar vein to labels and panels, signage also has the ability to shape engagements. The previously mentioned Orthodox Bishop had made a pilgrimage to Westminster Abbey to the shrine of Saint Edward the Confessor the same morning as his museum visit. Comparing the Abbey to his exhibition experience, he acknowledged that “many people treated the Abbey as a museum” but he and his companion were able to pray in both places. Yet, the Bishop’s ability to pray at the Shrine of Saint Edward had to overcome a physical boundary in Westminster Abbey that was never present at *Treasures*. At the foot of the steps to the shrine of Saint Edward the Confessor a sign reads: “This is a very fragile area and so is not available for general sightseeing. It is strictly reserved for private prayer”. The sign also featured an image of a priest presenting the sacrament before the shrine’s High Altar (see Figure 7), underscoring the Abbey’s decree on devotion-only access. The site was, therefore, set apart from the crowded spaces below (and thereby made a distinction between the pilgrims and the ‘secular tourists’). As the Bishop went to the Abbey in order to pray at the shrine, he was allowed to enter the area. Places of worship, popular with pilgrims and tourists, often use signs to ask for quiet or to restrict access to certain areas of the building during services (see Figure 8). Signage often (materially) embodies the priorities, agendas and authority of those who manage the space. Despite being open to all, places of worship prioritise worshippers over ‘sightseers’. By doing so, the restricted areas possess the potential to lessen or eradicate the inhibiting factors that prevent sacred connections, as those discussed at the museum. Factors that may inhibit acts of devotion, such as lack of space, noise (including insensitive utterances), and lack of time, are diminished as the restrictedness of these religiously significant sites heighten the possibility to have longer and more peaceful engagements. Labels, panels and signs, therefore, have the potential to both inhibit and enable devotional experiences. Working alongside the objects and spaces, they can direct visitors to information that may help them to pray (such as the name of a saint), but they can also direct (some) people away from the possibility of a religious experience, as seen with the sign at Westminster Abbey.

## Plenitude

The experience of encountering large assemblages of exhibits is a feature of many exhibitions and *Treasures* was no exception. The quantity of reliquaries on display was marketed as a key strength of the exhibition, stated in the press release and accordingly promoted in the media. The spectacle of seeing so many gleaming objects in one space led to many positive comments about the overall beauty of the exhibition. For a small number of visitors, the number of exhibits also created a particularly intense sacred engagement. For Father Julian (the Catholic priest who I interviewed again a year after the exhibition) the quantity of holy objects created a “charged atmosphere”. Recalling his visit, he expressed that it was “just pleasant to see [the objects] gathered together in one place so that there was... a broad

spread of holiness". For the Priest, the large assemblage not only heightened his experience of the sacred, the chronological arrangement also helped him to reflect on and feel a part of the long tradition of relic veneration.

For Leona, an Orthodox Christian living in London, the presentation of so many reliquaries in one place undermined the veneration and pilgrimage experience. She explained:

you're not really supposed to have loads and loads of reliquaries all crammed together in one tiny little space. They would normally be spread out over a huge area and usually those things would be in a specific place which would be associated with the life of that particular saint... You're supposed to actually take the trouble to go to it rather than it coming to you.

For Leona, the bringing together of the reliquaries in one space made the experience of encountering the relics too easy and, more significantly, omitted many of the components that form a typical pilgrimage.<sup>70</sup> Katrin Lund (2008: 101), in her account of a Catholic procession, proposed that the act of walking follows not only a geographic route, but is also a form of storytelling with a beginning that "plots a tale of belonging". For some Orthodox and Catholic Christians, the grouping together of these objects in one place came at the expense of the communal and personal journeys they would make to the pilgrimage site. The displays of multiple devotional objects, therefore, inhibited their ability to connect with them in a sacred sense. In other words, the exhibition compressed the time and distance it would take to travel to these objects, which consequently hampered the visitors' devotional experiences. However, not all visitors saw this grouping of relics as a problem. For example, a German Catholic monk called his visit to the exhibition "a small pilgrimage" as, despite it being "quicker", it still encompassed the core components of the ritual. Visitors' responses came down, in part, to their personal preferences about how they wished to engage with relics and museum exhibitions. And yet pilgrimages to one relic in a site associated with the life or death of one saint account for only a proportion of pilgrimage experiences. The problem for Leona and a number of other local Catholic and Orthodox visitors was that the exhibition made the experience of encountering the relics almost effortless.<sup>71</sup> 'Taking the trouble to go to' the relics involves a series of devotional acts along the journey and at the destination. The gaps

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<sup>70</sup> Leona explained, "If you make any shortcuts it just diminishes the beauty of the final object. That exhibition... It's almost like taking some drugs. You could go along and have your fix, get this amazing high feeling, come away feeling, 'Wow, this is incredible!'... It's like having the icing but not the cake."

<sup>71</sup> A Protestant university chaplain also described visiting museums as a pilgrimage, albeit in a "secular" and "personal" sense. For the chaplain pilgrimage was about "sustaining and reinvigorating and refreshing, [and] having an experience that makes you different". This understanding of pilgrimage mirrors Falk's (2008: 30) description of 'Spiritual Pilgrims', which he defined as visitors "who are primarily seeking to have a contemplative, spiritual and/or restorative experience".

caused by these absent acts proved for some visitors too large to overcome. However, pilgrimages to places of worship often involve engaging with many reliquaries and relics in one space (such as in a treasury), whilst other relics, such as Saint Thérèse's reliquary, have gone on tour. The 'relic in situ' could therefore be seen as the preferred and even idealised form of pilgrimage, especially when compared to the object-rich museum exhibition.

A Catholic father, who came to the exhibition with his wife and son, again, exhibited a preference towards one-on-one relic veneration, stating that he felt "spoilt" by seeing so many devotional objects. The experience, he explained, became an "embarrassment of riches". The sight of so many embellished reliquaries also drew too much attention to the abundance of relic, which is often cited in order to criticise and question the credibility of the ritual. Furthermore, encountering object after object ran the risk of desensitising the visitor through 'museum fatigue'. He explained: "by the end of any exhibition... you'll think, 'well I've had enough relics now, I've seen enough reliquaries'". A Catholic Brother also admitted feeling "relic'd" out by the end of the exhibition. To feel bored or tired from seeing so many relics could be deemed as disrespecting the saints whose relics are ignored.<sup>72</sup> The relics and reliquaries, therefore, had a profound effect on each other. Displayed together, they often competed for attention which, in some cases, led to a diminishing of their overall sacred charge.

For other visitors such as the American Orthodox Bishop and Priest, the number of objects proved "overwhelming", adding that "in a museum there's just so much you can't appreciate as well as you would if you were just in front of one".<sup>73</sup> Despite this, the Bishop and Priest admitted that the quantity of objects did not "diminish" the experience, as they were still able to venerate individual objects. As with all large-scale exhibitions, the sheer quantity of objects led many visitors to focus longer on some objects and less on others. This process of selecting objects to engage with proved a demanding experience for visitors who saw the majority of the objects as religiously significant. For example, Alina, a Russian Orthodox, prioritised her time in the exhibition, spending the majority of it with the Mandyllion. She explained:

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<sup>72</sup> The notion that a visitor's conduct may be deemed as disrespectful demonstrates the vivid nature of the devotees' social relationships with the saints, whereby passing over the relics equate to ignoring a loved one at an event.

<sup>73</sup> A Church of England visitor, who came with a group from her parish, also described the number of objects as 'overwhelming'. The visitor explained that had there been fewer exhibits, she would have been able to spend longer with each object (preferably while sitting in silence) which would have enabled a more devotional experience. However, because she paid entry to the exhibition, she was compelled to get her money's worth and look at each object.

During the working week it's hard to find the time so we have to choose what's very precious and the Mandylion of Christ is very, very significant.... [but] they're all very important.

Choosing how long to spend with individual objects was significantly aided by the museum's layout and design, with particular objects standing alone allowing for longer encounters. The different engagements experienced by Leona, Alina and the American Bishop and Priest was due, in part, to the agendas and motivations with which these visitors entered the museum. Alina, for example, attended with the acceptance that the exhibition was a form of pilgrimage, but one that presented challenges unique to the museum network to which she would have to adapt.

Though some devotees may perceive the pilgrimage in the name of one saint to be superior, it is the nature of relics to multiply and disperse.<sup>74</sup> Because of this, many relics are split up so that their fragments (be they shards, threads or flecks) go on to create new relics. Yet the plenitude of relics (albeit a different type of plenitude) was and is still used to attack the practice of relic veneration as either bogus operations concocted to deceive or misguided endeavours. Some of my informants referred to Martin Luther's attack on the number of skulls purporting to be that of Saint Barbara (the quote was displayed in the 'Beyond the Middle Ages' section). Fragments of the True Cross were also frequently implicated in the denunciation of relics. A number of visitors, for example, told me that were enough splinters of the True Cross to build multiple wooden crosses or even an entire ark; an ambitious estimation considering the size of the wooden fragments. And so the plenitude of relics in the exhibition not only raised concerns regarding veneration, but also around the objects' authenticity.

## **Benches**

Certain configurations of actors encourage visitors to spend longer periods with a museum object, which provide the potential for more meaningful (and devotional) encounters. Though spending extended periods with one object often requires deviating from the normative modes of moving around the exhibition space. Tim Edensor (2005) argues that all forms of walking are in some way constrained and enabled by the regulatory regimes and the material nature of the environment which, together, create a 'perpetual movement'. (A visitor attested to this when stating, "you seemed to be moved through [the exhibition] without realising you

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<sup>74</sup> The Council of Nicaea II, in 787, explained the benefit of encountering multiple representations of a holy figure: "The more frequently they are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay these images the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration" (Bellitto 2002: 32).

were being moved through it".<sup>75</sup>) Exhibitions also embody regimes and strategically placed material elements to ensure 'flow'. The space and conventions encourage visitors to complete their visit in a linear fashion within an optimum time; that is, a visit long enough to allow quality engagement with the content, yet short enough to ensure a profitable number of visitors can enter the exhibition without congestion.<sup>76</sup> How long visitors spend in an exhibition or with a particular object is also used as a measure of how successful a space or exhibit is (called 'dwell time' in quantitative visitor evaluation studies). Managing the temporal nature of people's experiences often presents a quandary for exhibition teams, with the needs and wants of the individual visitor's experience clashing with the needs and wants of the museum. In *Treasures*, this tension felt even more acute as the reverent and peaceful atmosphere which the museum tried to create, operated most effectively when fewer visitors were present.

Turning our attention to time, and more specifically, spending 'quality time' highlights a number of material actors. One of the most significant at *Treasures* was the bench. Seating allows for sustained periods of rest which increases opportunities for meditative and reflective experiences. However, unlike church pews, benches are usually very limited in gallery spaces, underscoring the normative nature of standing and walking. Museum seating comes in a variety of shapes, sizes and materials; all of which have an impact on the visitor experience. For example, wooden benches are less comfortable than, say, a cushioned sofa and so are less likely to encourage "long-term lounging or dozing" (Piotrowski and Rogers 2012). On the other hand, a bench with a back is more comfortable for sustained periods as the backrest provides more support, allowing muscles to relax. The aim, presumably, is to provide a seat that allows for physical respite, but maintains attentiveness through promoting an upright posture. A backrest also restricts the direction a visitor can sit, and therefore could be said to help direct their gaze towards a particular exhibit. Similarly, straight benches orientates the sitter to what is in front, as opposed to who they are sitting next to. Such benches hinder (but not prevent) social interaction. The latter is particularly important in allowing visitors to have private moments, despite sitting in close proximity to other people. Being able to have a private moment of devotion also depended on an array of actors working together, such as the lighting and music. The music in particular, as stated earlier, had the added bonus of encouraging people to talk quietly. So the benches hosted oppositional activities; they allowed some people to tune out of their immediate surrounds, while enabling others to socialise or attend to 'external' distractions, such as checking one's phone. This time-space dilemma also arose during the early stages of the exhibition's planning. The exhibition working group, for a brief time, entertained the idea of constructing an altar-like space with kneeling cushions to

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<sup>75</sup> Vox Pop interview conducted by MHM (2012).

<sup>76</sup> Visitors were allotted timed entry to the exhibition, and whilst no exit time was given (except for the Museum's closing time) the issuing of timed tickets heightened the visitors' temporal awareness.

illustrate how the reliquaries were originally displayed. However, this idea was scrapped as it was felt that such a display may encourage visitors to pray on the cushions and stay too long at one object and so potentially obstruct the view for others. The exhibition working group had a commitment to ensure that the exhibits kept people moving in the space.

*Treasures* provided wooden benches with backs (as pictured in Figure 6 on page 103) which were placed in front of a number of 'star' objects. A bench was also positioned facing one of the most impressive vistas within the exhibition – under the centre of the domed ceiling. In addition, a few rows of benches were situated before the projected slideshow in the final section. The placement of the benches offered a selection of views of different objects and spaces, which led to a variety of activities. Observed behaviours included private conversations, looking at objects, interacting with the multimedia guides, reading (particularly the exhibition flyer and the large print guides), checking phones, sketching, people watching and resting. As discussed in Chapter Four, it is not always possible to discern whether a visitor seated in a resting position is praying.<sup>77</sup> The interview data was therefore fundamental in qualifying my observations in terms of the sentiments that accompanied visitors' embodied behaviours. Little research exists on the specific nature of benches in museums beyond counting and timing how long people sit on them. An exception is Tillie Baker's (2011) study of seating at the V&A. However, the seating Baker observed were in so-called 'circulation areas' such as the V&A's Grand Entrance, steps, and reception areas. The study did not explore seating *in* the galleries, and therefore could not address the impact of benches on how visitors interacted with the artefacts and artworks. Yet, interestingly, Baker found that comfort played a minor role in people's preference regarding what seats to spend the most time on. Instead locality and the social nature of the space were the most significant factors. The comments I received about the position (and absence) of the benches also related more to what they faced as opposed to their comfort.

The Mandylion, as discussed earlier, attracted a large number of sitters. Its popularity, however, was heavily influenced by the fact that this was one of the last benches in the exhibition (besides the seating area for the slideshow). The bench was therefore inviting not only as a place to appreciate the 'Holy Cloth', but also as a place to rest and possibly contemplate the exhibition visit. Leona, an Orthodox Christian, shared her appreciation that the bench was positioned in front of the Mandylion. However, she also found that "when you're sitting on the bench there are so many people kind of crowding around those objects, you actually can't really see [the objects] anyway". A number of visitors also commented on

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<sup>77</sup> The difficulty in interpreting visitors' embodied behaviours was demonstrated in a conversation between two Catholic sisters. The older daughter described a woman who she saw as "quite clearly in a contemplative-like state in front of the image of Jesus". Her younger sister disagreed and thought the seated woman was just reading. Slightly frustrated, the older daughter exclaimed, "So we interpreted it differently!".

the fact that the benches were sometimes too low to see the exhibits they were facing. Viewing the reliquaries is a significant element of the devotional engagement, which some of the benches could not facilitate. Because of this (and the physical nature of veneration), visitors such as Leona often sat on the benches after performing the ritual. The embodied acts of bowing and kneeling were therefore set apart from the visitors' time sitting on the bench. Although for some visitors the latter were also considered devotional experiences.

A number of my interviewees mentioned the benches. However, in most cases, it was their absence that was noted. One visitor, a Church of England Priest, explained that more benches would have allowed for a more intense experience. The objects that she was most drawn to were in spaces where no benches were provided. She explained:

I think you can stand in front of something, like you would stand in front of a beautiful picture for a long time and just sit and enjoy it... It would have been quite nice if [the benches] had been set where there was something particular that you could see. Because often you weren't looking at anything in particular when you were sitting on them and I think that is quite important when you sit down.

I, therefore, asked what would have changed if she could have sat on a bench.

Well it may be quite a mystical experience, if you can switch off from everybody from around you, which you can do when you're just sitting down. I think a lot of people would find that... And also perhaps people that weren't particularly religious may find that they would get some kind of special experience out of just seeing it.

For the Priest, sitting provided the potential to tune out distractions, focus on the object and potentially experience the exhibit's divine power (even for visitors unaccustomed to such religious interactions). The relic's ability to affect people was therefore understood, by the Priest, to be shared with the bench. Personal moments of quietude often depend on certain embodied behaviours (for example, closing eyes, lowering head and resting one's hands on the lap). These physical gestures are usually better suited to a seated position, especially in a museum where there are other people moving about. Charlotte, who venerated at the exhibition, also found a lack of seating in the areas where she wanted to spend extended periods. On the day she attended, I saw her sitting on the floor with her back to the wall opposite a number of reliquaries. Asking why, she told me:

I suppose I wanted to take in several objects at the same time... and also there weren't any seats in that room, so I [thought], well, I'm going to lean against the wall and I thought, well actually it will be more comfortable if I just sat down.

Like the Priest, Charlotte found that sitting helped her to get in to the right mindset for prayer. Her decision to sit on the floor also emphasised the need to be in the same room to venerate,

albeit at a distance from the cases. For other visitors, the benches provided the (potential) opportunity to appreciate the ambience as opposed to specific objects. A visitor, speaking at a focus group session (run by MHM), expressed that the exhibition failed to move her spiritually or emotionally, but had there been “an area where you could sit for a bit more reflection”, her experience may have been different. Seating allows visitors to linger in a space, and possibly reflect on the exhibition. The music and lighting set the stage for such experiences, but the lack of seating provided few places to spend extended periods.

For spaces that promote a constant flow of moving visitors, benches are especially important in providing places to rest and focus. However, the placement of the benches, at times, were an obstruction. At the Mandyllion, visitors who wanted to prostrate themselves had to go around the bench (and the people sitting there). This meant that instead of bowing with the relic face-on, the praying visitors had to perform these movements at the side of the object. Similarly, the embodied responses of those who were praying posed an issue for other visitors as well as for the staff working in the spaces. One of the British Museum’s visitor services assistants (VSA) recalled one incident at the exhibition with a male visitor. She had noticed him looking at the Mandyllion for around five minutes (“which is normal as everyone is staring at that one at the end”). She then witnessed him fall to the floor and lie down:

So I ran to get my colleague, because I thought we’d need a first-aider or something. But when we bent down to say, ‘Are you ok, sir?’. He said, ‘Oh yeah, I’m fine I just need to lie down here for a while’... The main concern was that he fainted and he was unconscious. But once he said ‘I’m ok, I’m fine’, and said ‘I just want to stay here for a while’, we said ‘ok’ as it wasn’t busy and he wasn’t in the way. Because if it’s busy and his legs were sticking out all over the place then it would be different.

According to the VSA, the man lay on his stomach for about ten minutes and then sat on the bench for a further 15 minutes before leaving. The VSA affirmed that the man was “not distressed; he was just – I don’t know how to describe it. He was happy.” The placement of the bench and the behavioural norms that museums evoke make prostration physically difficult for visitors to perform. Such physical acts are also problematic for the staff whose role it is to manage the space and ensure that there are no obstructions. The VSA explained that, while the man lying down was shocking to see, “he wasn’t doing anyone any harm so we just let him get on with it”. The embodied adjustments and negotiations performed by staff and visitors, in response to the materiality of the environment and the norms of the space, demonstrated the clash between the institution’s desire to keep visitors moving and the desires to perform devotional rituals. Whereas a traditional church pew accommodates sitting, kneeling, and bowing, with a place to lay one’s Bible, the exhibition space was ill-equipped for such a range of bodily responses. Visitors were therefore left with the option to either adjust their behaviours or simply avoid performing physical rituals.

The provision of seating (or its absence) affected how visitors interacted with the objects and other people in the space. The benches were places to be social but also to be alone with ones' thoughts (and prayers). They offered places to step away from the objects and sit back, contemplate what was seen and enjoy the reverential ambience. The benches also aided activities that were external to the exhibition (such as writing a text message). Conversely, the seating positioned in front of specific exhibits provided opportunities for extended interactions with certain objects. And so, while we could say that benches provide places for encounters with objects, they also enable many other experiences. Sitting down before or close to relics does not necessarily give rise to religious experience. Yet the ability to sit does address the often cited hindrance of feeling obligated to move on from objects which, for some visitors, inhibited their ability to have a more devotional interaction. In the interviews where I asked the visitors what they were drawn to, on most accounts, the responses centred on the exhibited artefacts. However, in practice, visitors were also drawn to objects of comfort and respite, such as the benches. Thus, for some visitors it was the seating that drew them to the object, while for others it was the object that led them to sit down. Either way, the time spent sitting in front of the relic presented the potential for a variety of encounters.

### **Glass cases**

Focusing on visitor behaviour brings to light some of the more mundane material entities. Latour (1987) refers to these often ignored actors as being 'black boxed', whereby the actors within a network become so taken for granted they are no longer recognised as having their own distinct properties. He explains this by way of a camera, which is seen as one entity for the majority of users, but is in fact formed up of multiple parts that are rarely considered individually. Thus the exhibition or museum can, in some ways, be seen as a 'black box' that conceals such mundane actors as the air conditioning and the painted plinths. The actor-network approach not only draws attention to these seemingly less important actors. ANT also brings to light the many (material and immaterial) mediators that constitute visitor-object interactions. Some of these mediators were made evident during my interviews with visitors, while others became apparent during my observations in the exhibition space. As I walked through the exhibition, I looked for particular responses such as touching or kissing cases, handling religious jewellery, kneeling, mouthing words, crossing oneself, sitting for long periods before particular objects, and so on. However, some of these embodied responses could be seen as more 'religious' than others. It was, therefore, critical to interview the observed visitors in order to determine how they articulated their embodied responses, but also to check I had not misinterpreted their behaviours.

One actor that attracted a lot of physical contact and discussion was the glass case. Even before the exhibition opened there was talk in the museum that visitors may wish to touch and pray before the objects. Front-of-house staff were briefed about the possibility of such behaviour, whilst the British Museum's Director, Neil MacGregor (as quoted in *The Guardian*)

indicated that the removal of kiss marks was becoming a regular task for the cleaning staff (Kennedy 2011). The material properties of the display cases, as will be illustrated, significantly affected visitors' devotional experiences in the museum. The placement of the medieval objects behind glass meant that they could be studied closely. As relics are often concealed beneath altars, a number of visitors described particularly intense responses on viewing the objects.<sup>78</sup> Strategically poised spotlights within the cases also allowed attendees to examine and contemplate the accounts depicted on the reliquaries (usually of martyrdom). Likewise, the glass provided a surface to touch, kiss and to bless belongings.

Glass cases have a key role in disciplining the visitor. The glass and signs, such as 'do not touch' and 'do not lean on the glass', work in partnership to guide and condition the visitor's physical behaviour in the museum. Latour (1999b) proposed that objects take on the role of humans in a process called *delegation*. For the museum, the glass display cases assume the role of the security guard, dutifully forbidding visitors from touching the exhibits inside. The combination of the glass cases' material properties and the norms of the museum space thereby allow the security staff to be absent. And yet the different responses and experiences that glass cases enable are so multiple and complex, no human could ever replace the material object and maintain these associations. The very fact that it is glass, a material so often overlooked (or looked through), enables this actor to remain elusive and often contradictory. On the subject of the invisibility of certain actors Morgan (2012: 106) attributes this to the viewers' act of seeing:

One of the primary ways in which any gaze works is by concealing or minimizing one element in order to highlight another. In other words, we ignore some things in order to dwell on others. There is an economy to vision, which means that attention is focused on one object at the expense of another.

However, Daniel Miller (2010: 51) asserts that the non-human actors also determine what is noticed. Calling this the 'humility of objects', he argues that the ubiquity of certain 'things' "fade out of focus and remain peripheral to our vision". The subordinate role display cases play in museums mirrors Ernst Gombrich's (1995) writings on the perception of picture frames in art galleries. Gombrich proposed that viewers are meant to 'sense' picture frames 'marginally' so they do not distract from artwork at the centre. Display cases are sidelined in a similar manner. And yet, the glass case is also a complex web of paradoxes. They are a property that allows us to be close, yet remain at a distance; provides us a surface to touch, but prevents us touching what is inside; they can add a sense of prestige to their exhibits or relegate them to the status of mere curios. Whilst the museum may conceive the glass case as a mere protector, in sacred engagements many more qualities come to light that are often equally contradictory.

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<sup>78</sup> Within Catholicism, a relic beneath the altar is required in order to consecrate the building.



Figure 9: Postcards in the Museum shop (Berns 2011a)

I witnessed a number of visitors blessing objects on glass cases, including items purchased from the British Museum's gift shop such as postcards and books (see Figure 9) as well as objects brought from home. One such object was a wooden cross pendant, which belonged to a 14-year-old Catholic teenager who visited the exhibition with his family. The teenager stopped at a number of the cases around the exhibition. Holding the cross to the glass, he knelt on one knee and with his eyes closed he silently recited a prayer at a number of displays. Later when I spoke to the teenager, he told me that his wooden cross acted as a "spiritual camera". "It's like you come away with something from that exhibition that is real", his mother added. What the teenager's pendant enabled was a connection to the divine through immaterial and material entities. Starting with the teenager's body the actors in this engagement included the cross, the surface the cross touched (the glass case), the reliquary and relic inside the case, the saint associated with the relic and God in Heaven where the saint's spirit now resides. Furthermore, the teenager believed that the pendant could retain the holy nature of numerous relics from multiple sites, something that merely seeing could not do. The object's contact on the glass imbued the cross with sacred aura which could be taken away for future devotional interactions. Writing about medieval practices, Ronald C. Finucane (1977: 26) described this process as "a kind of holy radioactivity". Yet unlike the reliquaries, the display cases were not transformed into contact relics as no devotee (or community of devotees) held the belief that the cases retained the relic's sacredness. Unlike many of the reliquaries, after the objects were returned, the display cases showed no sign of their relic

connection. For the museum engagements I studied, the glass case acted only as a channel for the sacred essence to flow.<sup>79</sup> The glass cases' transformation was therefore temporary.

For Christian visitors who were accustomed to icons and relics, certain elements in the museum framework inhibited their ability to experience a divine connection. One visitor I spoke to recalled his visit to the Royal Academy's exhibition *Byzantium 330-1453*:

I've been to an exhibition of icons where I felt that they were hidden too much behind glass and they were too distant from the onlooker... There was something quite sterile about the way they were displayed. My feeling about an icon is that they're very... they're living, breathing artefacts that help us explore God, but there was something lost.<sup>80</sup>

This visitor desired an unobstructed closeness between him and the icons, which the exhibit could not provide. Yet it is possible that other elements inhibited his ability to experience a divine presence such as other visitors and the institution. Bill Brown (2001) suggests that we often only notice the materiality of an object when it fails to perform as it should, like a crack in a windscreen.<sup>81</sup> And so, for this visitor, particular physical entities within the museum space became more visible as physical and spiritual barriers when a divine engagement failed. This visitor viewed icons as having a life force, which the glass cases somehow threatened and even destroyed. As a consequence, the cases rendered the encased icons 'sterile' and so unable to pass their sacred aura on to other human and non-human actors.

Although some visitors commented that it was the glass case that prevented them from venerating, reliquaries in glass cases are common in devotional spaces. In 2009 a relic of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux toured the UK. The tour saw thousands of people queue to touch and kiss her glass-encased reliquary. A visitor, who visited *Treasures* and Saint Thérèse's relic, told me:

When you visit relics, you're used to not being able to touch them... say [with] Saint Thérèse's reliquary you couldn't actually touch it, because it was in a glass case and you get used to the fact that you're next to it but... you are able to touch the case which is enough.

For the visitors I spoke to, who venerate at various pilgrimage sites, encountering glass cases was not a stumbling block as the cases are accepted components within their religious

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<sup>79</sup> Glass can also be said to act as a channel in 'televangelism' in the moments pastors appeal to viewers to touch the television screen in order to "be touched by divine power" (Meyer 2006: 440).

<sup>80</sup> The exhibition ran from 25 October 2008 to 22 March 2009.

<sup>81</sup> The invisibility of glass cases within galleries, could also be described using Latour's (1999) notion of 'blackboxing' whereby the individual elements of a device or activity (such as an exhibition space) fade out of awareness due to their efficiency at performing their collective task.

practices. Nevertheless, as the placement of the relics in museum display cases restricts who and what can be in contact with them, certain experiences were impeded. For example, a number of my Orthodox Christian interviewees mentioned that when they venerate a relic in a church there would be a priest, a choir singing, the lighting of candles, and so forth. The sound, smell, sight and tactile nature of the church experience was therefore considerably different to that in the museum. And so, the presence of the objects in the museum display cases made them all too aware of what actors were absent in their museum-based engagements.

The use of glass display cases, as well as the inclusion of labels and audio guides, blurs the distinction between what many see as museum practices and the workings of a place of worship. A year after the exhibition closed, I spoke to Jake at a British Museum members' event who had attended *Treasures* the previous year and subsequently holidayed in Germany. During his trip he visited Aachen Cathedral where a number of the reliquaries from the exhibition derived. Describing the "Cathedral museum, as opposed to the Cathedral itself" Jake explained:

it looked to be more like an exhibition than a proper church. Glass cabinets and all that sort of thing. It didn't look or feel like a church unlike some of the Mediterranean ones where you can see that this is still a living, breathing centre of pilgrimage... They'd put things in glass cabinets. What's the difference between a glass cabinet here and a glass cabinet there? Not much. At least I don't think so.

Unlike his visit to Aachen, where it "didn't feel like genuine devotion", Jake interpreted the people at Santiago de Compostela, Spain as "genuine pilgrims". In Aachen, the presence of the museum's glass cases, the separation of the exhibits from the Cathedral's sanctified spaces and the behaviour of the visitors all contributed to Jake's feeling that his museum interactions could not facilitate sacred engagements. Questioning the difference between the glass cabinets in Aachen and the British Museum, he reaffirmed his feeling that neither site enabled the same "genuine devotion" that he witnessed in Santiago where glass cases featured little in his memories of the site.

The mobile nature of certain devotional objects allows them to perform different functions. One relic which was displayed in at least three ways in the space of a year was a 13<sup>th</sup> century reliquary pendant. The small reliquary presents the names of three saints, Saint George, Saint Demetrius and the martyred Georgian queen Saint Kethevan (see Figure 10). The pendant's permanent home is within the British Museum's Medieval Gallery. However, during the summer of 2011 it was also exhibited at *Treasures*. The reliquary's affiliation to Saint Kethevan is of particular religious and national value to the local Georgian Orthodox community. In 2012, I accompanied a small group of Georgian Orthodox Christian women (including a nun) to visit the reliquary in the Medieval Gallery. Standing before the wall case, the women crossed

themselves and discussed the object's label (which used a different spelling of the Saint's name). Speaking to them later, they explained that although it was important for them to visit the relic to pray and give thanks, the experience was restricted due to the absence of particular religious elements in the engagement.



Figure 10: Reliquary pendant (Trustees of the British Museum n.d.)



Figure 11: The reliquary (centre) during the service (Khasaia 2012)

After a period of negotiation in 2007, the congregation of the local Georgian Orthodox church were able to come to the British Museum on Saint Ketevan's feast day. The service took place again in 2011. Instead of performing this in the Medieval Gallery, which would not be possible with the number of people and objects involved, the reliquary was transported to one

of the board rooms and deposited into a much smaller display case to protect the delicate pendant. The smaller size of the case allowed the object to sit within an assemblage of objects, including a lit candle, echoing the conventions of the church service (see Figure 11). The service, which lasted over an hour, involved each member of the congregation placing their forehead and sometimes lips on the small case. However, like at *Treasures*, the reliquary's participation in the service was short-lived. Following the service, the pendant was promptly returned to the Medieval Gallery, leaving no trace of its continuing ceremonial function. The absence and invisibility of any indication of religious practices in the museum reinforces the belief that either such activities do not take place or are contrary to the normative ways of interacting with exhibits. The object's return to the Medieval Gallery also underscored that the museum perceives this object primarily as an artefact illustrative of a historical narrative, as opposed to a component within continuing religious rituals.

Museums are not the only establishments that clean the glass that protects and contains their relics. A Catholic priest told me that at the end of mass, people come to the front of the church to kiss the glass in front of the relic. Following the service, the glass is "hygienically wiped with a little cloth". This is not a purifying ritual that, for instance, cleanses a space of pagan contaminants. It is a practical measure to enable a particular interaction (kissing a relic) to occur. Just as visitors adapt their rituals within the museum, places of worship modify their practices in light of new information including the potential for bacteria to spread from worshipper to glass and from glass to worshipper.<sup>82</sup> Bacteria, as an actor, would have been present, but unknown during the medieval period. However, as people are now aware of these invisible actors, many institutions have taken measures to lessen the potential for such germs to spread. Bacteria, as a contagion, therefore operates in a similar way to the equally unseeable, but knowable (if the belief exists) sacred aura, which can also be transferred through contact via an object. Yet, the museum has another agenda when cleaning: to erase any marks that may obscure the view of the object behind the glass. Consequently, evidence of past engagements is removed. By contrast, many places of worship display the accumulative marks of reverence, which inform visitors that the objects are still active elements within ongoing rituals. Such material reminders range from the wearing on statues (from the continual touch of pilgrims) to offerings left by altars. But what is acceptable in a place of worship is not always permitted in a museum. The offerings become litter and any physical contact is perceived as potentially damaging. So in the daily routine of the exhibition, the visitors leave marks and the cleaners wipe them off. To know whether a case has been kissed one either has to witness the act in the moment or see the mark on the glass before it is removed. Though, as I witnessed, visitors also prevent kiss marks through their own doing; by leaning into the case but not quite touching the glass. Whether this motion is conscious or

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<sup>82</sup> A Catholic visitor admitted that she did not kiss any glass cases due to their questionable hygiene, "because everyone's touched those cases".

not, it ensures that no mark is left. The glass case is therefore complicit in enabling acts of veneration (through providing a surface to touch), preventing acts of veneration (by restricting physical access to the relic) and aiding the erasure of marks made from religious performances.

## Vials

The practice of channelling and transferring the sacred qualities of objects is not limited to Christianity. Students from a local Shamanic Homeopathy visited the exhibition on a number of occasions to perform rituals with the objects. The course teaches the skills for creating homoeopathic remedies as well as channelling techniques for tuning into one's Spirit.<sup>83</sup> One student, Rachel, explained that the course comprised of a range of teachings including Eastern medicine, herbalism, and anatomy, which - on completion - would enable the students to qualify as homoeopathic practitioners. The course members came to my attention when I noticed small groups standing in front of the glass cases in meditative poses. The students had visited initially with their course tutor as a field trip and they continued to visit individually and in small groups throughout the exhibition. On their first visit they received four or five information sheets, summarising key objects to look at in each room, which Rachel kept for her subsequent visits.

I observed Rachel, her course-mate Anthony and other members of their course on a number of occasions. One afternoon, I spotted Rachel and Anthony standing together before one of the reliquary statues. They both had one hand on the case and their eyes closed. They stood like this for a few minutes and, after consulting their sheaf of papers, they repeated the same position at another case. Revisiting the objects was an important part of their ritual. "Every time is a completely different experience, depending on how you are feeling, where you're out, what you're doing, [and] the intention you've come with", Anthony explained. The engagement was, therefore, highly variable as the interaction was subject to what (and who) was materially present in the museum and on their personal thoughts on the day of their visit. The pair had also purchased some postcards from the exhibition to take home. Whilst Anthony said that his experiences with the postcard would be less "profound" than with the exhibit "because it's an imprint of the original", Rachel stated that the act of looking at the postcard would bring back the sensations experienced when with the object. In this sense, the postcard acted as a reconnection by reconstructing elements of the network from their initial engagement. However, for this group, it was not souvenirs which were of interest (in terms of

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<sup>83</sup> The course also includes 'field trips' to Kew Gardens and Chelsea Physic Garden for plant flora, the Hunterian Museum for medical and surgical pathology, the Natural History Museum for zoology, and the British Museum "for mythology-based teaching" (Sharma 2013: 2).

retaining the relics' sacred aura) but creating homeopathic remedies. Another student, Carrie, explained that during her visits she was looking to "tune in and channel those energies" from specific objects that she either felt particularly drawn to that day or that bore properties that she was seeking out for a particular remedy. When she found such an object she channelled its energy into a glass remedy vial. Describing this procedure, she stated that the process did not take away energies from the museum object. The ritual, therefore, mirrors the relationship between the contact relic and the primary relic within Catholic and Orthodox practices. In a subsequent interview, Carrie explained that her encounters with the museum object involved creating a channel that connected the visitor's body, the object and (if desired) a small glass vial containing clear alcohol. On hearing this, Rachel took a bottle from her pocket. As this particular vial had not been used within an act of channelling, the liquid was not "yet" a remedy. The friends explain that channelling does not require a vial of alcohol if one wants to tune the energy for oneself. However, in order to allow a third party to access the energies, a remedy bottle is required.

Fundamental to tuning into the energies of an object was the intention to create a channel, which gave the practitioner access to the pasts, presents and futures of the museum object. Carrie explained that the act was "more like you're opening a portal so your remedy can also be part of that". Within Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, icons are frequently called windows, suggesting that these devotional objects also act as portals (to the heavens). The metaphor alludes to the idea that veneration goes beyond the object in order to access times, places, people and 'spiritual' entities (or energies). The ritual therefore combines networks that exist within the artefact's Euclidian space as well as entities that are networked in ways that are religious and supernatural. The process of channelling operated in a similar way, with the object acting as a mediator in a sequence of many mediators that, together, allowed a two-way communication. Key to this process was the body of the practitioner (which acted as a channel), the vial of alcohol (for storing the energies) and the intention to create a specific remedy for a specific treatment. The glass vial, therefore, operated in a similar way to the glass display cases in the act of veneration, as the material glass substance did not retain the energy, but only allowed it to pass. Instead it was the alcohol that was transformed, as Carrie explained: "We're creating a link so the remedy becomes linked to that object. When someone takes it, [they are] able to access that link". Although she resisted describing the process as capturing or retaining the energies, it is inevitable that in order to produce remedies for later treatments the energies had to, for at least a temporary period, remain stagnant within the vial. The body of the student also had a transformative effect on the energies during the initial engagement between relic and visitor (and vial, if desired) and also between the remedy and patient. Though the students stated that touch is not a necessary part of the ritual as they are able to go beyond the physical limits of the body, it was evident from my observations that having physical contact with the cases helped the students to focus and thereby tune into the objects.

Following one of their visits, Anthony told me that the object that he was most drawn to was a pilgrim badge depicting Saint Catherine on the wheel. As Anthony had visited Saint Catherine's monastery in Egypt, the object evoked personal memories of his trip. Yet, more significant for his spiritual practices, was the circular motion represented by the Saint's spinning wheel which, he explained, "worked with the emotions and the heart". Moreover, these sensations could be shared as he could "transmit them out for the good of everyone". The object's religious, spiritual, material and symbolic properties (past, present and future), were all implicated within his shamanic practices. Both Anthony and Rachel agreed that the presence of such spiritually significant objects in the British Museum created a sacred space. This sentiment was echoed by the (aforementioned) Greek Orthodox Bishop who told me that the relics brought blessings to the museum and to London. The Shamanic Homeopathy students in the museum drew strong parallels with many of the Catholic/Orthodox visitors. This was due to the fact that both sets of visitors engaged with the same actors (in terms of cases and exhibits), both performed embodied rituals, and, perhaps most significantly, their actions culminated in being able to take something away.

## Conclusion

The purpose of *Treasures* was never to provide a place for worship, but to offer insights into the ways medieval Christians perceived and interacted with devotional objects. And yet the presence of particular assemblages of actors created an environment that (for some visitors) enabled a sacred connection to be made. Central to these sacred connections was the ability to be in the physical presence of the relics. For visitors who venerated relics, the opportunity to be near, to pray, and to focus on the divine through these material fragments allowed them to connect to the divine. Although the exhibition lacked many of the elements that devotees would expect to find at a holy site, the presence of the object, at times, was enough to allow a divine connection when engaged within prayer. Speaking with visitors, it became apparent that those who had experience of veneration and pilgrimage were more likely to engage with the relics as they were intended. They understood the conventions, the doctrine and held the desire to communicate with the divine in this way, often 'in spite' of the location. The influence of visitors' pre-existing networks were also evident in the example of the student who practised Shamanic Homeopathy, as they entered the exhibition with the motivation and intention to perform their channelling rituals.

The agency of some of the more mundane actors such as glass and overheard comments demonstrated the various ways particular actors enabled and prevented connections. For example, material actors such as glass cases were a barrier for some visitors but not others, as glass cases are frequently encountered at religious sites. However, for other visitors, the cases and the physical presence of other visitors inhibited their ability to perform the religious ritual. No engagements were the same as each depended on many variables within the museum's and visitors' networks. Thus, the visitors' beliefs, practices, and (visiting) motivations and the

museum's objects, interpretations and exhibitions were all implicated, with some actors and motivations proving more powerful, in forging and severing, links than others.

Juhani Pallasmaa (2012: 12) wrote that in an encounter with an art work, "I lend my emotions and associations to the space and the space lends me its aura, which entices and emancipates my perceptions and thoughts". The exhibition space at *Treasures* was also active in shaping visitors' experiences. Visitors who reported feeling a sense of 'peace', 'awe' and even a 'charge' in the Reading Room were able to evoke other emotions, thoughts and memories which helped to enable a stronger sacred engagement. Yet in the exhibition, many variables within and between the museum, relic, or visitor networks could problematise this exchange between the visitor and the space. In other words, many actors within the network had the potential to move from inhibitor to enabler. For this exhibition, even the relics could move between these statuses if, for instance, their authenticity was questioned. The religious objects within the exhibition were, therefore, highly contingent and unstable.

## chapter six:

# HAJJ: JOURNEY TO THE HEART OF ISLAM

The British Museum's trilogy of exhibitions entitled 'Spiritual Journeys' concluded with '*Hajj: Journey to the heart of Islam*'.<sup>84</sup> From here-on the exhibition will be referred to as *Hajj*. Unlike the object-focused *Treasures* exhibition, which placed the relics and reliquaries at the core of its interpretation, *Hajj* focused on the human experience of one pilgrim. The exhibition began as a conceptual project whereby the curators sought to find objects and media that would most effectively communicate how and why the pilgrim, in the past and present, undertook the journey and rituals. Despite a wealth of objects illustrating the many routes and rites that take place, the exhibition retained its original emphasis on the pilgrim. In regard to the exhibition's subject matter and approach, this chapter will question whether a sacred connection can take place in a museum when the key actors in the engagements are not objects but places. How are these sacred connections configured within the exhibition? What role do the objects play? In order to address these questions, I will draw on three months of interviews and observations at the exhibition. My focus again pinpoints specific engagements that influence, disrupt or enable a sacred connection. Through isolating these encounters, I will follow the connections within the network to create a picture of how the exhibition was experienced by a variety of audiences.

Hajj, as the fifth pillar of Islam, is a requirement for all Muslims who are financially, physically and mentally able to perform the act. The main destination of the annual pilgrimage is Mecca, Saudi Arabia, with rituals also taking place in a number of nearby locations including Mina, the Plain of Arafat and Muzdalifa.<sup>85</sup> As non-Muslims cannot enter these sites, only Muslims can perform Hajj (the greater pilgrimage), which happens once a year, or umrah (the lesser pilgrimage), which can be performed at any time.<sup>86</sup> Hajj is also the largest annual gathering of people, with attendance figures in 2011 reaching almost three million.

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<sup>84</sup> The exhibition ran from 26 January to 15 April 2012 and was curated by Venetia Porter.

<sup>85</sup> Some pilgrims also visit Medina, a typical albeit non-mandatory aspect of many Muslim pilgrimages.

<sup>86</sup> This chapter will predominately refer to Mecca as the destination of the pilgrimage. My use of Mecca also includes the neighbouring sites as listed unless stated otherwise.

## The exhibition

Like the previous 'Spiritual Journeys' exhibitions, *Hajj* took place in the British Museum's Reading Room. As is the practice for special exhibitions, the Room underwent a complete redesign with a new layout, colour and lighting schemes, and object and multimedia displays. The shell of the room, therefore, remained one of the few constant actors throughout the exhibition series. Visitors entered the gallery via a corridor featuring a panoramic image of pilgrims walking to Mecca. This entrance space was accompanied by one of two sounds; the Islamic call to prayer or the prayer to announce the arrival of the pilgrim to God. As the visitors emerged into the gallery space, they were confronted by one of the exhibition's main attractions, the sitara that covered the door of the sacred cubed-shaped building at the centre of the Holy Sanctuary in Mecca (known as the Ka'ba). Ascending the steps to the gallery floor, visitors were met with a long-exposure photograph of the Holy Sanctuary (the 'Masjid al-Haram' or the Grand Mosque), showing a blurred stream of pilgrims circumambulating the Ka'ba.

The building at the core of the orbiting devotees was depicted throughout the exhibition as the direction of focus for Muslims in prayer and the symbol of their pilgrimage. In a command-like fashion, the first line of the introductory panel cited the ongoing obligation to perform Hajj: "All Muslims should undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca known as the Hajj once in their lifetime, if they are able". While this statement indicated an act to take place in the future, the majority of the exhibition described Hajj in the past and present, following a chronological narrative that identified each stage of the pilgrimage. In order to convey the human experience of the ongoing event, a prominent part of the exhibition was made up of large-scale photographs of people; making their journeys and performing the rituals. With the inclusion of contemporary and archival images, the past and present appeared to blur as the places and people changed but the rituals remained, in most part, unaltered. A model depicting the Mosque's 2014 planned development was also displayed, signalling the sacred site's future, which again underlined the persistence of the ritual across time.

Following the brief introductory section which explained the key principles of Islam, including the five pillars, the Prophets, the Qur'an and the geography, the exhibition began with the section 'Preparing for Hajj' (see Figure 12). The subsequent and largest section detailed the journeys pilgrims made. Starting from the outer reaches of five routes (situated within Arabia, Mali, Indonesia, Egypt and Britain) the exhibition traced the pilgrims' journeys to the section entitled 'Mecca the Blessed' (see Figure 13). The Reading Room's central display featured objects associated with 'The Rituals of Hajj', which are performed in the sacred sites. These included more textiles from the Ka'ba along with archive photographs, flasks of (the holy) zamzam water, and pebbles used to stone the devil (or the jamarāt). The exhibition concluded with 'The homecoming', a section exploring the emotional and spiritual impact of the pilgrims

(who can now be referred to as Hajjis) as well as the more material reminders, such as souvenirs.



Figure 12: 'Preparing for Hajj' (Trustees of the British Museum 2012a)

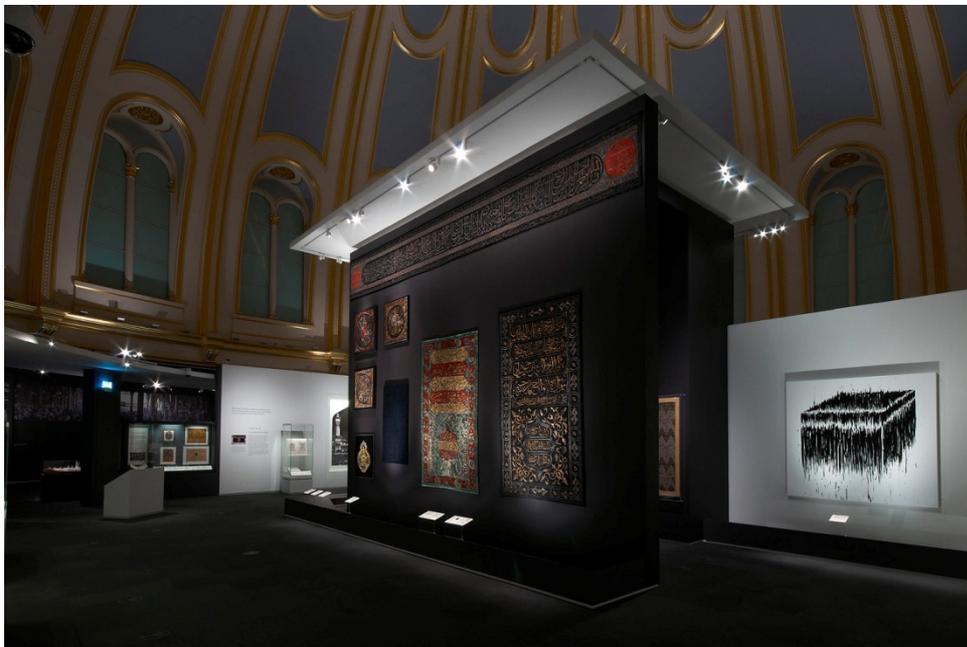


Figure 13: 'Mecca the Blessed' (Trustees of the British Museum 2012b)

## Key actors

Locating instances of sacred connections within a network continuously shifts with each new assemblage. A major transformative influence on museum networks are the installations of exhibitions, which bring together different objects, information, displays, and a new team of curators, loan partners and institutions. Yet many elements involved within the planning, build and running of a temporary exhibition remain the same, from the gallery itself to the staff that edit the panel texts and manage the marketing. This compounding of consistency and change is reflected in the types of visitors as each exhibition will attract both repeat and new audiences. These major shifts, instigated by the museum's programme of temporary exhibitions, bring new actors of interest into focus. During my interviews and observations at *Haji*, a number of elements were especially popular with the audiences. These included the sitara (the Ka'ba's door covering), and the film of rituals. Other actors of interest included the non-visual entities such as the scents of the textiles and the call to prayer audio clips. The social interactions between people within the exhibition were also a major factor in shaping visitors' experiences of the subject matter. Finally, the use of and relationship between the exhibition space and the prayer space (or Multi-faith Room) will be explored. I will therefore focus on these actors in order to trace their connections (and disconnections) with the divine.

## The sitara



Figure 14: The sitara (Berns 2012b)

One of the most discussed objects amongst my interviewees was the sitara, the curtain from the door of the Ka'ba.<sup>87</sup> The sitara exhibited in the exhibition was made in Mecca in 2003 and was offered as a gift by King Fahd ibn Abd al-Aziz Al Sa'ud. The cloth used to cover the Ka'ba (known as the kiswa) are ordinarily cut up in order to be offered as smaller gifts, as displayed elsewhere in the exhibition. However as this sitara was intact, the Project Curator Qaisra Khan speculated that the displayed sitara may not have hung on the Ka'ba but was instead a spare, as the kiswa textile factory usually make two sitaras of the same design. The label did not make issue of this and instead focused on the object's purpose, owner and a number of its Arabic inscriptions. A visitor from Qatar, Rashid, informed me that encountering the sitara was especially meaningful as he went on Hajj in 2003 when the same sitara (design) was on the Ka'ba. "So this is the same thing that I saw and now it's here... It's just overwhelming to see it here." The extra significance of seeing the 2003 sitara hinged on it being the same textile he encountered on the Ka'ba. However, whether this was the actual curtain used for the Ka'ba or the spare was not addressed in the label leaving most visitors to presume that it was. If the personal connection Rashid experienced was dependent on whether the sitara had physical contact with the Ka'ba, in the same way that a 'contact relic' operates, then the implied relationship offered by the label is, to an extent, misleading.

The sitara's label played a number of key roles in shaping engagements between objects and visitors. Listening to visitors' comments as they set eyes upon the textile, those who recognised the object appeared to speculate whether it was, in fact, from the Ka'ba and therefore authentic. After inspecting the object, these visitors often read the label to verify its authenticity. "That's the actual one", one Muslim woman said twice pointing to the label. Questioning the legitimacy of the textile was a clear consequence of its museum location. In Mecca one would never question the validity of the kiswa as its very existence in that space authenticates and consecrates the textiles. In fact, "the pilgrims... validate the authenticity and importance of the Hajj through their reverence for it" (Collins and Murphy 2010). Validation is also a shared process, informed by religious leaders, institutions and texts. Yet in the exhibition, especially for visitors less accustomed to the British Museum (and its reluctance to display replicas), a number of visitors required validation which was provided by the label text. While the label did not state that this was *the* sitara which hung over the door of the Ka'ba, the inclusion of its place of manufacture—in the kiswa factory at Mecca— and the mention of the King was proof enough.

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<sup>87</sup> Other textiles from the kiswa were exhibited in the section 'Mecca the Blessed' (see Figure 13). In order to mimic the Ka'ba, the textiles were displayed on a black cube-like structure. However, to avoid visitors circumambulating the cube and thus simulating the tawaf ritual, the cube was built into one of the gallery walls. This design decision meant that the majority of my informants failed to recognise and mention the black structure as the Ka'ba.

During the exhibition I positioned myself at the exhibition's main opening where the visitors emerged from the corridor. Here visitors were confronted by two sights: the sitara and the first view of the Reading Room's rotund ceiling. The sitara was situated before the steps to the main floor of the gallery due to its great height and therefore dominated the visitors' first glimpse of the exhibition space. Most Muslim parents, on seeing the sitara, pointed it out to their children and explained what it was. This was especially important as the object, being at the beginning of the exhibition, lacked the interpretation and context of the later textiles. Only visitors who knew of the Ka'ba and its coverings were able to identify and thus appreciate the object's religious significance at this early stage. Recognition was therefore necessary and visitors often exhibited embodied signs of familiarity when they entered (for example, pointing, expressions of admiration such as 'wow', and conversations amongst family members). One mother, on seeing the curtain turned to her young son and asked: "What does that remind you of?" To explain she motioned bending forward to pray. The combination of the sitara, the mother's physical gesture and, no doubt, the child's developing religious knowledge provided the necessary tools for identification. Hence, for many families, the sitara signalled the beginning of their children's educational tour of the pilgrimage, conducted collaboratively between the museum and the families.

Following the exhibition's preview the museum staff positioned a 'Please do not touch' sign in front of the sitara as visitors were witnessed reaching over to the textile (see Figure 14). For subsequent visitors, this small sign, together with the intermittent presence of staff and the conventions of the space, materially manifested the authority of the institution by preventing visitors from touching the curtain. Although, on occasion, the authority of this label was challenged and rejected. In the exhibition's final week, I observed a young Muslim father approach the sitara. As he did, he read aloud the 'Please don't touch' sign and turned to me and asked if he could touch the textile. Before I could respond, he blurted out, "shut your eyes" and with his hand stretched out flat, he gently touched the fabric. When he returned to his wife, I asked why he wanted to touch. His wife replied: "because it's touched a holy place". Touching therefore performed diametrically opposite actions, by bringing the visitor closer to the sacred site and yet highlighting the distance between them. "It's not religious", she told me. While the family said they did not consider the act of touching the textile as a religious ritual (and therefore bestowing the act with any divine or spiritual agency), the ability to handle the textile was nevertheless emotionally meaningful because of what the object was in contact with. Yet, the emotional significance is bound up with the sacredness of the cloth. The object's manufacture in Mecca and (possible) physical placement on the Ka'ba provided a link to the sacred city where (it is understood) pilgrims can have the most direct connection with God through prayer. "On Hajj you can't always get close or touch", the visitor's wife told me. In this respect, the museum provided an opportunity (albeit prohibited) to make a physical connection to the holy site. Whilst the sitara could not mobilise the properties of Mecca beyond its geographic location, for a number of my interviewees the sitara enabled them to

reflect on the divine connection they once experienced (or will experience) at the Holy Sanctuary.

A number of my interviewees desired a tactile encounter with the textiles. One such visitor was a teenage Muslim, Praveen, who came with her cousin. She explained:

It would probably be like as if I was there, you know... It actually makes me feel closer to God. It's been there – the House of God, for us anyway, so it'll feel as if you're touching a part of that mosque, really, that's been blessed.

The textiles operated in a similar way to contact relics in that, through physical contact, they retain a link to the divine. In most Islamic sects (such as Sunni Islam) this material relationship to the immaterial divine is not recognised as a legitimate path for sacred engagements. However, the longing to have a connection with a distant place is often fulfilled through engagements with fragments of that place. Whereas, in *Treasures* the Saints were materially mediated through their bodily remains, at *Hajj* (the exhibition) divine connections were mediated through memories and desires to perform the pilgrimage. The divine presence was, therefore, geographically distant but, in terms of the network, connected. Thus, visitors may not have experienced an imminent encounter of the divine when in contact with the sitara, but their memories or imaginings of the holy site still evoked a divine element (as the two are inextricably linked). Parveen wanted to feel that immediate sacred presence, which she believed could be made possible by touching the textile. However, as she was unable to touch the material, her connection to the divine was impeded. Discussing the central room where the majority of textiles were displayed, Parveen admitted that it was where she felt as if “you're there [in Mecca]” and, incidentally, where she most wanted to touch the objects. The cousins had not been to Mecca themselves and so their experience of the exhibition acted as a sort of quasi-pilgrimage, by creating a traversable space in the chronology of Hajj. The exhibition, the teenagers confessed, fuelled their desire to perform the pilgrimage and thus close the geographic and spiritual gap between themselves and the House of God.

A small number of visitors also described their encounters with the sitara as facilitating sacred engagements. For example, a Muslim woman, from the US, stated that the rituals in Mecca left her few opportunities to consider the “physical aspect of things”:

I also noticed that when I am on Hajj you're so engrossed with your own spiritual purification that sometimes you miss out on some details, like looking at the cover and the tomb of the prophet. It's so spiritual here. I don't know if you guys expected some spirituality but it feels very spiritual for us...

Although other visitors distinguished their experiences of the sitara in Mecca from their museum interactions by stating that the latter was ‘not religious’, for this American visitor these boundaries were far more permeable. She explained that “everything that is connected

to Hajj and the Ka'ba and the Prophet" had a religious and spiritual resonance for her and so she expected to feel this response on coming to the exhibition. Her "identity-related visit motivations", to take Falk's (2009a) term, were shaped by the strong possibility that the objects' sacred associations will enable her to experience (what she called) a "spirituality" within the exhibition. A Saudi Arabian visitor, who had performed the pilgrimage a "long time ago" also indicated that her engagement with the sitara in the exhibition had a religious quality:

I felt like it was the first time I've come closer and have taken moments to just see and reflect and read the actual script on the kiswa... During the Hajj you'll be very busy practising and performing the Hajj itself so [the exhibition provided] a good time to meditate.

Like the American mother, the Saudi Arabian visitor perceived her interaction with the sitara to have a religious element that allowed her to meditate on the words. Other experiences of the sitara evoked feelings of 'spiritual' nostalgia. For example, a Muslim visitor expressed that the sitara prompted "a very spiritual feeling... as if I was actually standing in front of the Ka'ba. It was as if I had a privilege to come and see it". Similarly, another Muslim visitor stated:

As soon as we walked in through the door and they had the door of the Ka'ba, it was just like I was there again. It took me back. It was like 'Oh wow, I'm there'... It just took me back to the day when I was saying those words.

For these two visitors, the sitara did not mediate an experience of the divine there and then in the exhibition. Instead, and as suggested by their use of "as if" and "it was like", their interaction with the textile evoked memories of their devotional experiences in Mecca.

The sitara's museum setting also enabled visitors to spend more time with the object. For Rashid, the visitor from Qatar, seeing the textile in the museum provided a very different experience to that in Mecca. "There you are surrounded by people shoving you around, pushing me so... it's much more peaceful here." The combination of having artefacts separated out and the (often unspoken) rules around museum etiquette reduced interruptions and thereby increased the potential for longer engagements. Such extended encounters with objects are less possible in Mecca. A Muslim father, who came to the exhibition with his family, expressed a similar sentiment after looking at the curtain with his son. He stated:

I've been to Mecca but it's so busy you never have a chance to go close to the Ka'ba or have enough time there to read the inscription on the cube itself... So being here in a static place with not many people around you get a chance to read it... I couldn't do that even if I went to Mecca, because it's so packed and people are all around it. You can't get near it for you to see it.

As both Rashid and this visitor suggested, the crowds made it difficult for them to study and appreciate the textiles in Mecca. However, their experience was also greatly influenced by the fact that they were there as pilgrims with specific rituals to fulfil. For instance, a British Muslim visitor explained that “when you’re there [in Mecca] you’re not looking at [the kiswa]... you’re just there for the experience. You don’t analyse.” Another Muslim woman expressed that in Mecca she was unable to appreciate the textiles as she was “in the zone”. By contrast, visitors to exhibitions are expected to closely examine the exhibits. Label information and audioguides, for example, frequently encourage close scrutiny of objects by pointing out different elements. Hena, who had performed Hajj, described how struck she was by the sitara in the exhibition. She attributed this response to the curtain’s placement in the museum where it looked “a lot grander”. However, what was more significant was that her museum visit was framed by a different set of motivations and intentions, in comparison to her pilgrimage to Mecca. These changed how she encountered the textile. She explained:

I think when you’re on Hajj what you’re concentrating on is the very spiritual aspect and following the rituals. Whereas, obviously, you do see the detail, but that’s not effectively what you’re there for or you don’t take in or appreciate that as much. And Hajj is such a busy, busy, busy time you can’t get that close to these things at all.

The sitara’s museum location, therefore, allowed visitors to get much closer to the object and appreciate the true scale of the Ka’ba, as the gallery space offered a different perspective. A student from Brunei, who was only able to see the sitara from afar when she performed umrah, stated that being able to get so close to the curtain in the exhibition was “quite a privilege”. For this student and many other visitors, the textile’s relocation did not extinguish its special connection to the Holy Sanctuary, but allowed an additional form of appreciation.

The different ways visitors experienced the sitara in the museum in comparison to how they saw it in Mecca were shaped by a number of factors. For instance, in Mecca, the sitara is engaged in rituals, most notably the tawaf (the circumambulation of the Ka’ba). Within such acts, the curtain is only a small constituent element of the rituals; one of many actors nested within an established network of practice. For pilgrims, the primary focus of their pilgrimage is (ordinarily) worshipping God. However, in the museum, the sitara is no longer a part of an authorised religious ritual. For most visitors, the expected engagement in the museum was one of learning and aesthetic appreciation. In the exhibition, the textile was also the largest object in the space, and so attracted more attention. Once again, the significant role of the sitara in the museum differed from the more subordinate role the sitara played in Mecca. A Malaysian student, who visited the exhibition, commented on how her encounter with the sitara shifted. Having been to Mecca on pilgrimage, the student stated that “when you see [the textile] it’s more like an art [work] here. There [in Mecca] we don’t really see it as art. You appreciate it differently”. Her friend, who was also Muslim, expressed that she encountered the sitara in Mecca while in a “prayer mood”, which she did not experience in the museum.

The students' perceptions were also influenced by the ways the textiles were displayed. Separated from other elements from the Ka'ba and mounted on a plain (temporary) gallery wall, the labels, lighting and 'Please do not touch' signs collectively contributed to their transformation.

Although some visitors expressed that the museum context allowed them to appreciate the material elements of Hajj, a number of visitors were reluctant to give the objects too much attention and significance whether in Mecca or at the British Museum. For example, a Muslim male visitor, who hoped to go on Hajj in the future, stated that:

What I associate with Hajj is more the religious side and the entity behind it, whereas the textiles... the materialistic part of it doesn't interest me so much... I just think when it comes to Hajj it's from the religious standpoint.<sup>88</sup>

Another Muslim visitor, who had performed Hajj, expressed a similar sentiment:

This may sound cruel, but the kiswa is just a covering. I like the calligraphy and everything on it is amazing but when I was actually on Hajj that was the last thing I actually concentrated on so I don't have much recollection of what it looked like.

These comments were expressed in opposition to the positive remarks their respective companions conveyed towards the textiles.<sup>89</sup> The visitors' disinterest in the textiles may have reflected their personal interests, but it is also likely that their resistance to the displayed objects were shaped by the Islamic prohibitions on visually depicting aspects of the religion. Although these prohibitions are generally understood to concern images of people, prophets and idols, it is also more broadly interpreted as a forbiddance on any act or intention that could be deemed as worshipping a material object (Eaton 1985). These restrictions are particularly emphatic within Sunni Islam (and both of these visitors were Sunni). And so, for the latter visitor the material elements of the pilgrimage featured little in his account of his exhibition visit and pilgrimage. Another Muslim visitor, Aasif, who had performed Hajj twice explained that the sitara held little significance during his own encounters as the kiswa held no sacred qualities away from its sacred setting. He stated:

I didn't even look at it. I was like, 'oh, that's the door', and moved on. It doesn't hold that... It just can't do it justice... There everything else looks beautiful and seeing it

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<sup>88</sup> This visitor also expressed an uncertainty in respect to the images on display in the exhibition, stating "I'd never associated art and Hajj going together... For what I gather it's forbidden to draw certain images with Ka'ba and stuff you've got there".

<sup>89</sup> These exchanges followed my question "What aspects of the exhibition were you most drawn to?".

here holds no value. So actually what brings the kiswa value is the Ka'ba itself, not the cloth. It defeats the point. If there's no Ka'ba what's the point of the kiswa?

For Aasif, only the Ka'ba provided the 'value' in his sacred engagement. Unlike the other visitors described, no holy aura was transferred from the Ka'ba to the textiles. Aasif's encounter with the sitara in the museum was therefore similar to his encounter in Mecca in that the curtain could not grab nor maintain his attention. This underscored his conviction that the kiswa held no religious significance independent of the Ka'ba.

The majority of my Muslim interviewees were reluctant to call their exhibition visit 'religious'. 'Spiritual' seemed to be the preferred choice of term as this evoked a more personal and subjective experience which was left more open to interpretation. Religious, it appeared, was reserved for more official rituals such as prayer. One visitor, who described her visit as spiritual as opposed to religious, explained that after her museum trip she was going to go to the Regent's Park Mosque, "so there's your religious part of it done", she joked. While the exhibits permitted visitors to contemplate on the acts of prayer or worship which take place on Hajj, no one I spoke to stated that their visit provided a time or space to pray. Instead a prayer room (or 'Multi-faith Room') was provided, enabling the museum to facilitate visitors' religious obligations away from the exhibition.

For other visitors, the materiality of the objects was central to their positive experience of the exhibition. A visitor, who had yet to undertake the pilgrimage, described her experience of seeing the coverings:

I was absolutely transfixed at all the textiles. They were absolutely phenomenal... People get annoyed with me because I do just stand and stare at things when I'm transfixed. I think it's just being in the presence of something like that... You can always see photos of them but nothing compares to actually seeing them in person... And it made me think as well that I can't believe that I'm going to get something like that in person one day when I actually go.

A Muslim father, who was also preparing to perform Hajj in the near future, stated:

The videos you can see anywhere. It is the actual physical presence of some of the things like the covering of the Ka'ba... It strikes you... Perhaps it takes you there... For a little while, you just become totally oblivious of people, of things around and you're focused on that place, on that piece and where and whenever it was hanging - that place, going back in history. This was supposed to be the site of the first house of worship of God, even before the time of Abraham. So for that reason it takes you through a journey... I would say, almost like a spiritual journey... if you stand there in front and just let the thing take you... definitely, very emotional.

The descriptions of these visitors' encounters, while standing before the sitara, mirrored the experiences many of my informants reported while performing the tawaf (the circumambulation of the Ka'ba) in Mecca. It is, therefore, likely that similar personal accounts also shaped the visitors' experience of the curtain in the exhibition. Ian Reader (2013: 8) described a Japanese exhibition located in an airport shopping mall as a "pilgrimage in miniature". The exhibition replicated pilgrimage routes using soil and other objects from the shrines in order to raise the profile of the actual pilgrimage sites in light of dwindling pilgrim numbers. Yet, the exhibition itself also presented a devotional experience that came to the people "rather than waiting and hoping that people would come to them" (2013: 7). While the motivations for running the exhibitions in Japan and the British Museum differ, for a number of Muslim visitors, the combination of objects from the pilgrimage site, the embodied performance of moving through the exhibition space, and the act of reflecting on the symbolism of the rituals, constituted a kind of "pilgrimage in miniature" or, to use the words of the Muslim father, a "spiritual journey". However, the exhibition-as-pilgrimage was not a substitute for performing Hajj.<sup>90</sup> Rather, it was looked upon as a taster of what was to come.

It was not only Muslim visitors who were affected by the presence of the textiles. A Christian visitor, from Germany, stated:

I particularly enjoyed seeing the real objects such as the cloth – the material that they cover the Ka'ba... It's very magical... there's something very sacred about it. One could sense that.

Whilst the physical aspects of the textiles and their presentation may have contributed to their sense of sacred for non-Muslim visitors, it is also likely that the object's participation in the rituals within Mecca (as an essential component within the pilgrimage) added to this reverent response. The proliferation of images and film showing the sitara in situ, whether encountered within the exhibition or prior to the visit, were therefore crucial in making the textile's sacred connection known. Yet, some visitors, the majority of whom were non-Muslim, only recognised the sitara as a work of Islamic art (through an Orientalist gaze). This perception was shaped by the visitors' previous experiences and knowledge as well as the way these textiles were displayed, in the fact that they were labelled and some of the smaller pieces were mounted in picture frames.<sup>91</sup> Although, a small number of visitors described how

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<sup>90</sup> Speaking about the exhibiting of the curtain at the British Museum, the official spokesperson for King Abdel Aziz Public Library (Saudi Arabia), Ahmad Turkistani said: "The sitara will stand to symbolize the Holy Kaaba because we cannot actually bring the kiswa" (Alrashid 2012). A number of visitors shared this sentiment in that the object, along with their memories, helped to evoke the presence of the Ka'ba.

<sup>91</sup> At *Treasures*, the reliquaries were regularly viewed as works of art. However, the relics, by contrast, were far more resistant to such alternative engagements due to their corporeal properties.

their perceptions of the textiles-as-art changed over the course of the exhibition. A Methodist visitor who visited *Hajj* twice, explained that on her first visit she could “appreciate the beauty” of the objects, but could not relate to the religious rituals. On her second visit, “it clicked”. She continued:

it translated into what it meant rather than just saying, that’s beautiful. I came to [the exhibition] because I love the tapestries and then that sort of managed to draw me into the other stuff. It was all very beautiful, and then reading people’s accounts...

The textiles acted as a ‘gateway object’ by guiding the visitor to other themes and aspects of the exhibition (Francis et al. 2011). Through this, the visitor was able to find a way to empathise with the devotional aspects of the ritual through considering the textile as part of the pilgrimage. In this sense, the actor networks for which the sitara was a part changed for this visitor, allowing her to understand how other people may perceive the object.

## Scent

While the exhibition acted as a ‘taster’ for those who had not (or cannot) perform their own Hajj, the experience was very different for those visitors who had undertaken the pilgrimage. For visitors who had encountered the textiles in situ, the museum’s display of the same objects highlighted particular omissions in their engagement. One such absence was scent. A number of visitors recalled encountering the textiles’ strong musk-like scent; an aroma unique to the textiles and to the site. This scent was an integral part of Sadia’s memory of her interaction with the Ka’ba in Mecca. Moreover, the scent played a key component in her continuing relationship with the textile, as she was presented a piece of the kiswa on her final day of her Hajj.

[The friend] handed me this little envelope... When I opened it... In fact before I even opened it I smelt it, because it’s very highly perfumed with musk and I knew instantly what it was, and it was a piece of the cloth... And I still have it to this day and it still smells. It’s exactly the same, after what? Four, five years later! And I cherish it. It’s one of my most prized possessions.

The fabric, for Sadia, held a great deal of significance for a variety of reasons, stating that: “it’s spiritual, it’s emotional, it’s a reminder, it’s a piece - I guess for me - it’s a piece of the House of God”. The scent anchored Sadia’s gift to the Ka’ba even before she set eyes on the material. Sadia sought to make this olfactory connection in the exhibition, but as she admitted, “I did have a little sniff... [but] I couldn’t smell nothing”. Hena, a visitor who had performed Hajj, also commented on the exhibition’s lack of scent. Hena visited the exhibition with her friend Becky, a Muslim-convert who had yet to visit Mecca. Hena explained that during their visit, she mentioned to Becky that “it would have been really nice if next to [the textiles] they could have a smell or an aroma... [as] it would have given a different dimension.” For Hena, scent

would have provided an additional sensory experience, akin to what she encountered on her own pilgrimage. She suggested that had there been a scent box of some kind next to the textiles, the smells may have simulated the multi-sensory interactions she had with the objects on pilgrimage, albeit in a fragmented manner. Thus, the accumulative experience of engaging with these different sensory elements may have created more opportunities for visitors to relive memories and sensorially share this with others. Sadia and Hena's responses also reveal the intense multi-sensory engagements that are often experienced on Hajj. Both women spoke of the specificity of the sounds and smells experienced on the pilgrimage, from the call to prayer to the scent of the pilgrims. As certain perfumed products are prohibited, pilgrims can purchase and use scented oils, many of which are marketed specifically for use on Hajj.<sup>92</sup> As discussed, a number of my interviewees said that they were not in the frame of mind (or lacked the opportunity) to focus visually on objects in Mecca. Scents, and in particular new scents, involuntarily invade "human bodies at will, being the most difficult to shut out and control" (Clack 2011: 213). The uniqueness of the smells encountered on the visitors' respective pilgrimages were ingrained within their sensory memories. The exhibition's displayed objects rekindled these remembered scents, which made their absence in the exhibition all the more prominent.<sup>93</sup>

The absences of particular elements in the exhibition were often identified by Muslim visitors when they tried to imagine how people with a different religious affiliation (or none at all) would engage with the same exhibits. For example, some non-Muslim visitors considered how it might have felt to view the objects as someone who believes in Allah, has the embodied knowledge to pray and so accepts the spiritual validity of the pilgrimage. The visitors' projected image of themselves as a devotee supposed a divine connection. The sacred link thus emerged as a present absence – an actor which exists only as an apparition. Imagining another visitor's lived experience also reflected back on one's own engagement, making evident what was missing. Putting oneself in another's shoes, so to speak, was exercised by a visitor who described herself as a born-again Christian. In an interview, she explained how her relationship to the exhibition was experienced through this process of imagining 'the other':

I could see the draw of it because of the feeling people get all gathered together in a place like that and the physical things that you have to do and go through. I can see that [the rituals and sites] are very, very attractive and would be a big pull for people, emotionally...

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<sup>92</sup> Applying perfume and oils is considered part of the cleansing process in Muslims' preparation for performing prayers. This ritual was supported by Abu Sa'id, a companion of Prophet Muhammad, who is said to have stated: "It is obligatory upon every adult youth to take bath on Friday to brush the teeth and use perfume if available" (Islahi and Khan 1985: 131).

<sup>93</sup> Taste was also mentioned in a number of interviews and in the exhibition's visitor comments book. The most popular taste was that of dates, a popular snack on Hajj and a souvenir to take home.

but I must admit, I was looking at it from an outside view point but I find it extremely interesting.

This visitor recognised her limitations in her understanding of the Muslim experience of Hajj. Absent in this Christian visitor's encounter with the pilgrimage was the divine aspect, as revealed in the Qur'an and other scriptures. The degree to which one is able to relate or even empathise with alternative perspectives depends on how knowledgeable, aware and 'spiritually open' the visitor is of the different forms of engagement (a factor which is enhanced by the exhibition content). Similarly, Muslims that had performed the pilgrimage often envisaged what it would be like for those visitors who did not have the same direct encounter. This occurred often in groups where visitors shared their Hajj experiences. For example, throughout the exhibition, Hena shared her experiences of Hajj with her friend (Becky), by contributing personal details and information that the exhibition omitted. Thus, by commenting on the aroma, Hena made the missing scent both present and absent for Becky; present through mentioning its existence and absent by drawing attention to the fact that no scent could be detected. The absences were also made present through the information provided by the exhibition, such as the labels, videos and objects.

Scents associated with particular religious sites and rituals were also mentioned by a number of visitors to *Treasures* for similar reasons. One visitor, who recently converted to Eastern Orthodoxy, expressed:

Some incense would really create - even for people who haven't come in a reflective state - those kind of mystical attachments [that] would make people perhaps have a much more deeper experience. For many of these relics, wherever they are, incense is part of their worship and the venerating process.

For this visitor, the scent and sight of incense would have added to an assemblage of actors that, he felt, would have been far more conducive to veneration. It seems, therefore, that including more things and practices from the place of devotion is desirable for those who want to have an equivalent experience in the museum. This was also evident at the Georgian Orthodox feast day ceremony, described in the previous chapter, where the sight, scent and sound of the Priest wafting the fragrant smoke from a thurible helped to recreate the multi-sensory experience the congregation would find at a church service. Many visitors, at both *Hajj* and *Treasures*, expressed (either directly or indirectly) that the more the exhibition space emulated the material environment of a devotional site, the more likely they were to have an experience that was devotional. However, what was also apparent from the data, was that the more an exhibition space tried to recreate a religious site the more noticeable it was when certain elements were omitted, changed or inserted.

## Film



Figure 15: Visitors watching the film (Trustees of the British Museum 2012c)

Despite the number of objects in the exhibition, the artefacts featured very little in visitors' exit interviews. A number of exceptions included the textiles (like the sitara), the Mahmal (the ceremonial palanquin which once travelled from Cairo to Mecca) and the contemporary works of art. This may have been for a number of reasons, with the curators and designers playing a significant role. For example, the contemporary art works and textiles (including the more unusual and thus memorable Mahmal) were afforded more space and often mounted at height which gave them more precedence. This and their large size may help to explain why these objects featured most in interviews. Secondly, the objects were used predominately to illustrate particular details of the pilgrimage, from the journey to the rituals. It was, therefore, less about the objects' individual properties and more about adding prominence to a particular event, individual or place. Thirdly, as explained, the curators wanted to focus on the human experience and so the objects took a 'back seat' as they alone could not effectively convey the social, emotional and spiritual experience that many of the visitors would know firsthand. Aspects of the exhibition, which managed to capture the experience more effectively, included the photographs and the oral and written testimonies. However, it was the seven-minute film in 'The Rituals of Hajj' section that was mentioned most.

The main film of the exhibition was made up of excerpts from the IMAX movie 'Journey to Mecca: In the Footsteps of Ibn Battuta' (Figure 15). At this point the visitor had traversed five

global pilgrimage routes, completed a mini-introduction to Mecca and was about to enter the central space of the Reading Room with objects and images from the sanctuary. The film detailed clearly and concisely the rituals performed, explaining when and where they take place and their religious meaning. The seven-minute video also allowed visitors to sit down on the provided benches and absorb the information together. The popularity of the film seating area, which was often crowded with standing visitors, was partly due to its production values.<sup>94</sup> The film's scale, IMAX quality, drama, emotion and comedy (in the form of an inquisitive child and an ill-tempered camel) were praised by many of my informants. The compelling nature of the film was also due to the chosen shots, which presented the ideal pilgrim experience. Just as tourist photographs "cast the natural and cultural resources of a destination in the best light and even prescribe the proper host-tourist interactions through their depictions" (Hunter 2008: 354), the film showed a pilgrimage in which every aspect was performed correctly and effectively. Through a combination of close ups of pilgrims in prayer and aerial shots of the crowds, the human experience of the places and rituals were made visible.<sup>95</sup> The film ended with an image of a male pilgrim, looking directly into the camera and saluting a farewell, as the narrator read the evocative line: "For many pilgrims this has been a profound spiritual journey that would have changed their life forever". A large number of my informants stated that the film, more than any other aspect of the exhibition, best captured the emotional and spiritual experience of Hajj. The video was also praised as one of the more successful learning aids for all audiences in terms of conveying the ritual as ongoing, or as one visitor described, as "a very direct experience of now".

Like the sitara, the film evoked many memories of the pilgrimage. For instance, a Malay student, confessed that the film brought tears to her eyes as it triggered thoughts of her own Hajj.<sup>96</sup> This response was not religious, she stated. Rather, it reconnected her to those feelings she experienced when being in the sacred city. As mentioned, visitors' reluctance to define their visit as 'religious' stemmed from both personal and often institutionally-defined divisions of what practices and places are appropriate for sacred encounters. Regardless of how the visitors described their museum experiences, the exhibition allowed many visitors to reflect on their past pilgrimage and devotional experiences. Another Malay student from the same group commented that the film also enabled her to see the places she had visited on

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<sup>94</sup> The aforementioned crowds also draw in more visitors.

<sup>95</sup> A non-Muslim visitor, who attended the exhibition with her Muslim partner, explained that the film made the pilgrimage "more tangible so it was more of a human experience". To this, her partner added that the film "gave [the exhibition] more context than simple artefacts which are maybe too hard to interpret".

<sup>96</sup> The film also evoked feelings of nostalgia. For example, a British Muslim woman stated that watching the film "felt like I was there [in Mecca], because I've been there before so it just felt like I was back there [and] now it kind of makes you want to go back".

pilgrimage, but from a different perspective. “Here I can see a lot of things and, now, I think pretty much clearer. So it’s very cool,” she added. Visitors often explained that, despite the crowds, the experience of praying and performing the rituals on Hajj were very personal. Thus, little time is spent looking or reflecting on the experiences of other people. And so, the film (as well as the photographs and personal testimonies) enabled visitors to relate their experiences with other people both past and present. Another group of Malay students, one of whom was Muslim and the other Hindu, agreed that the film, along with the photographs and quotes allowed them both to connect to the experience on a ‘personal’ level, which the artefacts (specifically the textiles) could not do. “Had the artefacts been there without the personal accounts they would have just stood alone as artefacts”, said the Hindu visitor. For this visitor, the artefacts failed to provide the connections to the experience of the site in the same way the other elements could. In his writings on film, John Lyden (2003: 52) asserts that, like rituals, “the participant enters in to an alternate reality” when engaging with film. In the context of the exhibition, one’s understanding of the ‘alternate reality’ depended on the visitor. For visitors who did not practice Islam, the film presented a window into another world, whilst for those who had visited the sites, the experience was more of a reflection, albeit from a different perspective.

Writing about a documentary series entitled *Sacred Rites and Rituals*, Ronald L. Grimes (2004: 28) describes the effect of films on audiences:

Viewers undergo a process that resembles pilgrimage... In this respect, the film is a quasi-initiation. Viewers are shown or told about mysteries, events, which... will reveal something important. In the end, however, viewers return with mere souvenirs, the trinkets of pilgrimage, and not the transforming knowledge imparted in an initiation.

The film as initiation fails for the author because it cannot act as a substitute for the ‘real’ ritual. However, in terms of the exhibition experience (as opposed to the pilgrimage), the film could be viewed as ‘quasi-initiating’ as it prepared visitors for the subsequent section. The film came at a juncture in the exhibition, allowing a moment of respite to learn and contemplate the rituals performed on Hajj. In this sense, for some visitors the film achieved this as the IMAX video was often cited as one of the preferred aspects for learning about the rites. Yet, Grimes' depiction of the film's reception only applies to those viewers who have not practised the rituals.

Whilst the exhibition and film’s linear narrative may have evoked a sense of pilgrimage, no visitor was under the illusion that their visit evoked the same personal experiences as Hajj. For example, a Christian visitor who described her visit as a “really quick, speeded up tour” of the pilgrimage acknowledged that it only scratched the surface:

I got to the middle, I was like, 'Ah, phew! Yay, I've done it!'... It was really exciting and it gave a bit of the excitement, like a tiny, tiny glimpse of thinking, wow, this is all the stuff that they have to go [through]...

The visitor understood that the exhibition and film only provided glimpses (or 'snapshots' as another visitor described). By showing the rituals, from Mecca to Arafat, the film both brought the places closer and pushed them further away, by revealing the particularity of the location (theologically and geographically). John Lyden (2003) draws parallels between religion and film in their ability to construct an "aura of factuality", a phrase coined by Clifford Geertz in regard to religious rituals. As discussed in the previous chapter, visitors often desire and expect to discover factual information in museums. Likewise, documentary film is often viewed with the same aura of factuality, which may help to explain its popularity. Yet while film and religion can both exhibit an authentic aura, their construction can also attract scepticism.

The film and photographs' ability to capture the emotional aspect of Hajj was not experienced by everyone. A British Muslim visitor I spoke to shared his disappointment that the film did not include pilgrims' personal accounts:

The film just talks about the physical acts and like, it would have been nice to explore, you know... more experiences and the feelings that people have. Because the whole thing's quite emotional and you can't see that emotion... you can only see the physical.

Another visitor, a Bangladeshi man who came to the community preview of the exhibition expressed a similar sentiment: "In Islam it is more emotional. It's more feeling than pictures and information. It's more one to one". For these visitors, the exhibition failed to represent their individual experiences of Hajj. A connection was missing. However, their dissatisfaction was less about their own experience of the exhibition and more about the perception of other visitors, especially non-Muslim attendees.

A number of Muslim visitors I interviewed admitted that their reasons for attending the exhibition was to see how their faith was going to be exhibited to non-Muslim audiences in light of the often reported issues surrounding the religion (e.g. extremism, terrorism, etc). With this as a motivation, it is natural that some Muslim visitors were assessing whether the exhibition failed or succeeded in portraying Islam effectively. However, a question here arises as to whether an exhibition can ever capture the emotional and spiritual side of a ritual for everybody. I posed this question to the Bangladeshi visitor. He responded: "I know you cannot hang people there and say 'speak to the audience', but at the moment it's very naked. The actual emotional part of Hajj is missing."

A German Catholic visitor, who had been on a number of Christian pilgrimages, expressed a similar sentiment in terms of the exhibition's limitations:

In the end I think the pilgrimage is a spiritual thing which can't be sort of shown in an exhibition. You really just have to do it and see what it does to you afterwards. That's the very personal side of it. And that obviously can't be shown or given or made clear in an exhibition. I didn't expect that because I know this can't be done.

This visitor was able to relate, to a certain extent, to the emotional and devotional aspects of Hajj because he too had performed a pilgrimage. The visitor, therefore, appreciated that the museum exhibition could never truly communicate the personal experiences of pilgrimage. However, other non-Muslim visitors remarked that the video (more than any other exhibit) successfully showcased the emotional experience of Hajj. For example, a Scottish Christian visitor stated that watching the pilgrims on the film affected him:

I did get goosebumps... when you're seeing films of people going through each bit... it is quite emotional seeing people doing it. Even though I don't believe, it's still amazing to watch.

The visitor explained that the filmed sequences of pilgrims performing the rituals made him "clearly aware of how important [Hajj] is for people". In contrast, an American self-described "cultural Christian" visitor, stated that the ritual of throwing the stones at the pillar, as a symbolic attack on the devil was a "bit much" for him to believe. From the film, he could see that the ritual made the pilgrims "feel really good", stating that "you can tell by the look on their faces". "But", he added "I couldn't relate to it". The film, thereby, provided (visual) access to the emotions of the pilgrims, but also created a distance between his own understandings and that of the (filmed) pilgrims.

The awareness (and sometimes disappointment) that the exhibition did not evoke the experience as felt in the sacred setting was expressed more frequently at *Treasures*. At *Treasures* visitors readily compared their experience of engaging with the relics and reliquaries in the museum with their encounters with similar objects in a church. *Treasures* provided many of the entities necessary for veneration, including the relic itself, and so the substitution of the church for the museum was a relatively minor alteration for some visitors. At *Hajj*, however, visitors were less inclined to make such comparisons in respect of the artefacts, as the objects in the exhibition are not usually understood to enable the same sacred connection out of context.<sup>97</sup> The objects instead pointed to Hajj which only reminded visitors (for those who had been on pilgrimage) how spatially specific (and incomparable) the experience is.

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<sup>97</sup> However, saint and relic veneration is practised within smaller Islamic sects, including Shi'a Islam, and so particular objects may evoke sacred encounters away from their site of origin.

## Audio

As visitors entered the round Reading Room alongside a panoramic image of pilgrims (Figure 16), they were met with one of two sounds: the adhan, the Islamic call to prayer or the talbiya, a short prayer to announce the arrival of the pilgrim to God. Like the sitara which immediately followed the audio extracts, appreciation of their presence required recognition. Yet for visitors who were not aware of their messages (especially as the recordings are unique to Mecca), these melodic vocalisations in Arabic provided an appropriate 'Islamic' atmosphere to the entrance. Key to this was the adhan, which is often perceived as a central component within the "pious soundscape" of public spaces in Muslim countries (Hirschkind 2006: 123). For one visitor, who described herself as nonreligious but with a non-practising Muslim father, the inclusion of the audio provided an illusion of being in a sacred place: "It made you feel like, you know, you're in an Arabic country and they're calling, calling you to prayer". Practising Muslims Hena and Becky even joked that on hearing the call, they instinctively thought it was time to pray. The sound of the call works by "regulating and auditizing the social rhythms of Muslim societies" (Hirschkind 2006: 123). As many visitors were accustomed to hearing (and acting on) the adhan within a religious context, the sound triggered memories of such places and practices. A Bahraini student, who had previously performed umrah, admitted getting goose bumps on hearing the adhan as the call prompted recollections of her own pilgrimage. Similarly, visitors described the emotional impact of the sound as "just hitting" them, suggesting their response was in some way unexpected and immediate.<sup>98</sup> Other visitors expressed their experience as more accumulative, and so the sound of the adhan and talbiya worked to complement their encounters with other exhibits. Like the sitara, the recordings provided a connection to the sacred site and to one's own personal experience of the pilgrimage. The sounds at the entrance, and in particular the more recognised adhan, acted as boundary objects as the same audio extracts provided a variety of experiences for different visitors. Occasionally, these different engagements impacted upon one another when, for example, visitors shared their experiences or overheard those of others.

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<sup>98</sup> A visitor, who described herself as a non-practising Muslim, said that the adhan acted as an "immediate" way to get in to the "mindset of someone who's a believer and someone who's going on a pilgrimage and someone who might be hearing this at the time". The adhan therefore functioned in a similar way to the soundtrack of Gregorian chants at *Treasures*.



Figure 16: Entrance to the exhibition (Trustees of the British Museum 2012d)

The use of audio was recognised by a couple of visitors as a particularly tricky media to use. Hena and Becky discussed the difficulty of selecting the appropriate ‘Islamic sounds’ for such an exhibition. Recognising the varying agency of different sounds, Becky pondered “if you have the reading of the Qur’an then everyone’s obliged to be silent.” Becky’s experience of Muslim people’s response to hearing the Qur’an, most probably at a mosque, would pose an issue for the museum not only in terms of its Muslim audience, but also its non-Muslim visitors. The sacred quality of spoken Qur’anic verses, according to Muslim scholars, requires quiet and focus. The Islamic literature often quotes a passage in the Qur’an which explains how one must listen to the spoken sacred word: “Hence, when the Qur’an is voiced, hearken unto it and listen in silence, so that you might be graced with [God’s] mercy” (in Larsson 2011). However, in exhibitions, different aural elements are constantly vying for the visitors’ attention, and so the nature of the museum space runs the risk of possibly distracting visitors away from the audio extracts of the Qur’an (or visitors simply ignoring and talking over the recitations) and thus causing offence. Another pair of Muslim friends also expressed their desire to hear verses from the Qur’an, “because when you go to Hajj, there’s so much Qur’an recitation”. However, to ensure visitors paid the appropriate reverence and respect to the audio, the friends proposed that the verses were played through headsets, as opposed to the loudspeaker. The experience of privately listening to the recordings, they explained, could have given visitors “a spiritual boost”. For these visitors it was evident that the practice of attentively listening to Qur’anic recitations (as opposed to simply hearing them in the background) played a key role in their own devotional practices. The women were therefore keen to share this experience with others but were also apprehensive about how such sounds would be managed and received in a site that was not religious.

St Paul’s Cathedral, London plays a two-minute recording of prayers every hour for the benefit of its religious visitors but also to remind the ‘tourist’ that the site is an active place of worship. The recorded announcements ask for silence, out of respect to those wishing to pray.

The recordings therefore make present the wishes (and authority) of the Cathedral's clergy and laity. Yet, utter silence amongst visitors is difficult to obtain. Like the adhan heard in Mecca, the recordings in St Paul's are purposefully loud and intrusive in order to evoke a physical and spiritual response. Audio at the British Museum's exhibition served a different purpose. Here the use of sound provided an understated contribution to the *mise-en-scène* to help give a sense of Mecca, albeit in a selective and minimal manner. One visitor, a non-practising Muslim, spoke of her appreciation of the subdued and spatially limited use of sound. "Having visited lots of Muslim countries", she said, "I know that the adhan could be very intrusive so I thought it was just at the right pitch." The subtlety of the audio, as observed by this visitor, ensured it did not irritate by leaking into other spaces and thus intruding on visitors' encounters with other objects and people. By contrast, another visitor (also a practising Muslim) posed that had the call been played at a louder volume it would have provided more of a "wow factor". Unlike her experience in Islamic soundscapes, in the exhibition she had to make an effort to listen to the sound as it was so quiet.

A number of visitors, who failed to hear the audio features above all the conversations, also expressed their desire to hear the adhan. A non-Muslim male visitor told me that had he heard the call to prayer, it would have given him a better "connection" to the religious sites and practices. However, due to the competing sounds, the exhibition lacked this aural dimension. And so, even when undetected, the sound of the adhan was present, albeit as a memory from a different site. Yet, not all visitors expected to hear such sounds so early in the exhibition visit. For example, a nonreligious visitor explained that he entered the exhibition while chatting to his friend and, so, had to return to the entrance in order to hear the adhan. The visitor explained that the sound played a crucial role in getting him into a "calm" frame of mind for the exhibition.<sup>99</sup> He therefore suggested that the museum provide a "sort of warning" about the presence of sound, that said "'chill out guys, just get into it', because a lot of people just come in chatting away and that disturbs those who want to absorb it". This visitor not only recognised the affect the audio recordings had on his own experience, but also how the sounds played a part in maintaining a peaceful ambience for others.

The exhibition soundscape also had to compete with a number of other sounds, including the beeps and crackles that came from the visitor assistants' radios. A nonreligious visitor, who was a frequent visitor to the British Museum, expressed that the exhibition spoke "plenty about spirituality but the constant noise" of the staff's radios "got in the way". She continued:

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<sup>99</sup> A Saudi woman who had performed Hajj also commented on how the sound helped her to get into the appropriate "mood for the Hajj experience", stating that "because I am a Muslim it is not only visiting a gallery. It brings some elements as if I am in Mecca itself".

For what's supposed to be one of the greatest religions in the world and is all about people approaching God, you couldn't get a look in at God with this kind of atmosphere. It's just impossible.

In response to her own question, she proposed that the exhibition play recordings of Arabic poetry and music to "control" the gallery's noise levels. Although the visitor had never visited Mecca, she desired an experience that reflected the pious spaces that she associated with the pilgrimage. These imaginings definitely did not include the sounds of security radios. Although in reality, the aural experience of Hajj would feature a multitude of noises from security staff and others. It therefore could be argued that the visitor's desire for a pious soundscape was romanticised. However, it is also probable that the visitor wanted quiet as it aided concentration and conformed to her perception of a museum. Her experience was therefore, most likely, a combination of the two. In fact, as described in the conflicting comments around volume, the sound had to meet the expectations of two contexts: the museum and Mecca. How visitors experienced the audio was therefore a negotiated process that incorporated the museum network with their memories and imaginings of the pilgrimage site.

## Visitors

A highly significant actor at the *Hajj* exhibition was the visitor. The *Hajj* exhibition, like the Holy Sanctuary itself, was always destined to split its audience between Muslims and non-Muslims; distinguishing those who could potentially perform Hajj and those who could not. The distinction between the non-Muslim and Muslim experience concerns the first pillar of Islam, the shahada, which is a declaration and acceptance of Allah and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>100</sup> Practising Muslims maintain this connection through embodied religious acts such as prayer, observing the festivals, donating to the poor and so forth. The distinction between the non-Muslim and Muslim experience is essentially a question of whether the visitor is able to experience a divine connection with Allah. Identifying oneself as a practising Muslim, and thus someone who has made the declaration, is recognised within Islam as the only valid path to the divine and so only those (adults) who make this declaration can (in theory) make the pilgrimage.

Many visitors I spoke to consciously acknowledged how differently the experience of the exhibition would be for Muslims and non-Muslims. This was not only a curiosity. Many Muslim visitors saw the exhibition as a means to promote inter-faith or cross-cultural understanding and so they wanted to see for themselves how their religion was portrayed. Through my interviews, I also identified another audience division: between those Muslims who had been on Hajj and those that could but had not. Each group did not experience the exhibition in

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<sup>100</sup> The declaration translates as "There is no god but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God".

isolation of each other. On the contrary, the experiences of particular actors in the exhibition affected the engagements of others within and beyond their social groupings. For visitors who had been on Hajj, the objects and media acted as either triggers for remembering their experiences and/or an opportunities for engaging with aspects of the pilgrimage in new ways. For visitors who were yet to make the pilgrimage, the objects, images and film helped them to imagine and visualise their own experience. Both sets of visitors were connected to the same place, but in very different ways. For the non-Muslim, personal experiences of pilgrimage were also occasionally evoked (when applicable). Yet most of these non-Muslim visitors acknowledged that their understandings of the emotional and spiritual experience were limited to that of an outsider. By identifying these groups of visitors it is not my intention to categorise and thus distance or sever the associations between sets of visitors. Instead I wish to highlight how visitors identify themselves in relation, and sometimes in opposition, to others. My informants (in varying degrees) created distinctions and unity in order to assert their identity. This was frequently made evident in the response to one of my first questions: “why did you decide to attend the exhibition?” Answers often began with “I am Muslim” or “I haven’t been on Hajj”.<sup>101</sup> Identity (in terms of self-classification) was therefore a key factor in visitors’ motivations for attending.

The exhibition was, on the whole, a very social event. Many families attended with young children, which gave relatives the opportunity to teach the younger generations more about the Islamic rituals. These personal accounts added another layer of interpretation to the exhibition’s display and further connections. Two Muslim visitors, in their late teens, even stated that they would return to the exhibition with older members of their family in order to hear their stories alongside the exhibits. A number of non-Muslim visitors confessed that they listened in to such conversations between family members and friends and it was often this information that was most compelling and authentic. Exhibits that seemed to attract a lot of discussion included the model of Mecca showing the 2014 developments (which one woman described as a “talking point”) and the photographs. A non-Muslim woman stated that she overheard another visitor saying that her relatives may have travelled to Mecca on one of the pictured boats. In response, the woman (who overheard this) expressed that she “got a sense that there was joy at being able to make a connection. So, in that sense, that gave me a good sense of how it might feel.” This visitor’s experience of the photographed pilgrims was therefore shaped and mediated by the visitors she overheard. A number of Muslim visitors also attended the exhibition with non-Muslim friends and colleagues. For instance, at a

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<sup>101</sup> Likewise, on the British Museum’s Facebook page (British Museum 2012), people often disclosed their religious affiliation (if any), when discussing, debating or praising the exhibition. Such comments included “although I am an atheist” (22 February), “as a Christian” (25 January) and “I describe myself as ‘culturally Muslim’ but not practising the faith” (22 February). These statements established the users’ relationship to Islam and, therefore, revealed their stance (or bias) as well as their level of knowledge in relation to the subject matter.

contemporary photograph of the Grand Mosque, a Muslim woman pointed out and discussed with her non-Muslim colleague where she entered the site and stood to obtain some shade. The non-Muslim visitor stated that her colleague's personal comments would be her "lasting impression" of the exhibition. The exhibits, therefore, helped to trigger her Muslim colleague's memories and communicate her experiences.

Other visitors spoke to strangers within the exhibition. For example, a Hindu and a Christian visitor expressed that one of the aspects they most enjoyed about their visit was meeting other people at the exhibition. One of the visitors stating:

It's nice to exchange and get more information from actual [*trails off*]... from a Muslim lady [as well as] listening to Muslim people explaining to others or members of their family.

Speaking with and overhearing conversations amongst Muslim visitors were perceived by some non-Muslim visitors as ways to access the Hajjis' emotional, physical and devotional experiences. However, members of visitors' social networks did not have to be physically present in the museum in order to influence their engagements. Parveen informed me that her father was actually performing umrah the day she visited. "He told me he was there yesterday... He is a part of the numbers now and we're going to be part of that number too." Again, these encounters demonstrate how the experience of the sacred was geographically remote and only accessible by certain religious groups. Thus, personal memories (whether one's own or of others) played a significant role in evoking the holy site.

At the exhibition, I witnessed and was also told about non-Muslim visitors approaching Muslim visitors in order to ask specific questions about the pilgrimage. Although the Muslim visitors who were asked such questions (of those I spoke to) were happy to assist, they were slightly bemused by the situation. Yet, outside this exhibition I imagine that a complete stranger approaching a 'typically' dressed Muslim person to ask a question about religious rituals may seem rather unusual. Some Muslim visitors were also happy to volunteer their knowledge to others. For example, a couple of friends remarked that a man heard their conversation about the rituals and he offered to explain what happened. The authorised sources of information on the pilgrimage were therefore seen by some visitors to be possessed not only by the museum but also by much of its (Muslim) audience. Such interactions were made possible as the exhibition focused on a contemporary event which is only accessible to particular religious groups. Those who had such access (to the pilgrimage destination) were viewed as additional and sometimes more authentic sources of information.

For other visitors, it was less about the overhearing of individual comments, but the experience of witnessing the interactions between groups of visitors. For instance, an

Australian Catholic visitor commented that the sight of seeing so many Muslim families gave her exhibition visit a sense of authenticity:

I thought there was a nice atmosphere in terms of the people ... I really felt like I was not in the British Museum because even actually walking in today, and I've been a few times... there did seem to be a cultural shift in terms of what people were wearing and the accents you're hearing.

While the exhibition could not replicate the crowds of Mecca, a number of visitors remarked upon how the social nature of the museum was transformed by bustling groups of families with their children playing, toddlers eating and others taking group photographs.<sup>102</sup> A Catholic visitor echoed a similar sentiment, stating that the crowds of people within the Reading Room made it "like being in a mosque or like being at Mecca". For both of these visitors, encountering groups of Muslim visitors positively contributed to their visit. Both of these experiences centred on the exhibition being busy, which was usually the case. However, at times, *Hajj* was quieter, with less talking and crowding. In these quieter times, visitors again associated the atmosphere and behaviour of the attendees as reflecting the pilgrimage and the religion. This was the case for Sadia:

The atmosphere's really nice and calm which goes hand in hand with Islam... because it's a peaceful religion and you know everyone's calm and looking. What really made me smile was that the younger children, the little children were taking an interest.

Thus, the exhibition was able to reflect different aspects of the pilgrimage in both its busy and quiet states. Also, as reported at *Treasures*, witnessing the positive and attentive way other visitors engage with the religious content of the exhibition played a significant part in the experiences of some individuals. For example, a Muslim visitor, who came to the exhibition with his wife, stated that:

What I enjoyed most about it was that there are a lot of non-Muslims here as well... We were just overhearing the conversations...I thought maybe coming into here I'll see more Muslims than anything else because they're curious about what they're going to do here and [wanted to] see how it is and how other people will perceive it. But there are more non-Muslims here which is more amazing than anything. It's unifying.

Another visitor described how he was "overwhelmed by the amount of people who visited". As with *Treasures*, the exhibition's ability to draw in large and attentive attendees, from different religions and non-religions, was interpreted by some as a two-way process: as an

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<sup>102</sup> According to the MHM (2012) evaluation report, 47% of visitors to *Hajj* were Muslim. 39% of all visitors described themselves as Sunni Muslims. In comparison, MHM did not report any Muslim attendees at *Treasures* (yet, four of my informants identified themselves as Muslim).

expression of interest by the visitors, and as a demonstration of the power of the religion to reach out to new audiences.

The presence of the visitors also transformed the museum for Rick, a member of the British Museum and a regular visitor to the special exhibitions. Rick, who described himself as nonreligious, heard about the exhibition through his local Muslim community in South London. He came to the exhibition that day to discover whether he “would have the same sort of feelings” towards the exhibition as his Muslim neighbours. Rick noticed that the audience was made up of “a lot of devout Muslims” who were sharing their experiences with other members of their group. Through observing the Muslim visitors Rick “got that feeling of what a real, true religious feeling [Hajj] was for them”.

I find that strange that people can be so... I mean it obviously stirs something in them [that] is really, really powerful.... I can't see anything like that doing that for me. It was more about observing other people... Obviously people like me were just viewing it and didn't get as much out of it. I suppose I felt a bit on the outside, to be honest, like I was encroaching on someone else's party... It was the first time in the British Museum where I didn't feel at home.

Observing visitors who had a religious affinity to Islamic ritual disturbed Rick, prompting him to recall a similar experience of unease at seeing “spaced out” nuns at the Vatican. His observations of Muslim visitors underscored his inability to relate to the pilgrimage. As discussed, the majority of Muslim visitors I spoke to were reluctant to identify their exhibition experience as ‘religious’. Yet for Rick, viewing from the outside, the Muslim visitors’ familiarity with the subject matter was interpreted as zealous piety. Rick admitted having no equivalent feelings for anything in his own life and so was unable to connect or comprehend their experience. Describing ‘people like me’ as only ‘viewing’ the exhibition, as opposed to having some form of religious engagement, underscored Rick’s inability to relate to the content and the devotees. The large numbers of seemingly Muslim visitors gave the impression of an audience that had a devotional affiliation to the subject matter.

During the exhibition run, the curator installed a comments book for visitors to leave a parting note. I witnessed many visitors not only leave a note, but read comments already left. Thus, the comments books made the experiences of other visitors visible (and material) and provided more opportunities for interaction amongst groups of visitors, as the messages were read and discussed. One woman I spoke to, who did not practise any religion, was shocked to read an offensive comment in the book.<sup>103</sup> She explained:

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<sup>103</sup> The comment read: “There were no Muslims before Muhammad and his alter ego Allah. I was keen to see the real side of Islam, the savage, sexist, racist side of it all. Ban Islam before it brings terror to us

I thought it was quite surprising that someone that had that opinion would have bothered to come to this exhibition and pay the money to go to an exhibition about something that they clearly were very negative [about]... It just seemed a rather bizarre thing to do.

Although visitors came to the exhibition with very different backgrounds, beliefs, practices and relationships to the pilgrimage, this visitor assumed that there was a consensus amongst visitors; that they were open-minded and free of intolerance.<sup>104</sup> Despite such rare occasions of prejudice, the exhibition appeared to create a type of 'safe place' where one culture could approach another. However, through the comments book (and opportunities to overhear and observe visitors), the exhibition also made visible how differently other people perceived and related to the divine. The nonreligious visitor added that, as well as the "negative comment" there were other parting notes which stated that the exhibition was good "because it tells you that there is no other God than Allah. But I don't agree with that. I don't agree with either of those statements". This visitor saw the pilgrimage as "psychological" and thereby dismissed the divine agency that defines the ritual for its religious adherents. A number of non-Muslim visitors also expressed an expectation that the museum texts (in the form of the labels and panels) would take a more 'rational' approach to reflect their perception that the museum was a 'secular' institution.<sup>105</sup> This was expressed in another comment from the visitors' book:

Astonishing that such an exhibition – with no critique at all – is in the British Museum. It belongs in a mosque, not a cosmopolitan museum - no context, no critique, just a celebration of a religion (British, [age] 59)

The exhibition therefore raised concerns about the placement and interpretation of religion in the museum. And so, whilst the lack of critique was perceived as respectful by some visitors, the positive presentation of the pilgrimage (in what the Project Curator, Qaisra Khan, called the "best case scenario" of the ritual) was seen by others as perpetuating the bias nature of the religion.<sup>106</sup>

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all."

<sup>104</sup> Whilst the exhibition did not explicitly refer to the negative aspects of Islam (that are often present in the media), such as fundamentalism, most visitors would have been aware of these wider networks and would have seen the exhibition as an alternative and positive view of the religion.

<sup>105</sup> As observed with *Treasures*, social media sites such as Facebook (British Museum 2012) were again used as a forum to criticise the presence of a religion in the museum. One such comment included: "To emotte about or describe something personally doesn't lead to 'a deeper understanding' (whatever that means)... I didn't realise the British Museum was in the market of peddling this latest fashion for 'feelings' or 'inspiring' the latest religion" [30 December 2011].

<sup>106</sup> Interviewed 25 April 2012.

## The Multi-faith room

As mentioned, a prayer space was provided in order to facilitate the Muslim religious obligation to pray at specific times (salat).<sup>107</sup> The British Museum's prayer space, which was named a 'Multi-faith Room' (and from here on will be referred to as MFR) was located next to Gallery 2 in the north-east of the museum. Unlike at *Treasures*, for the majority of visitors, the exhibits at *Haji* did not lead people to pray in the exhibition space. However, I did observe Muslim attendees praying in the MFR. As I will explain, this ritual took place in the British Museum not because of the presence of a particular object, but because the visit coincided with a salat time. In fact, for many, it was the absence of museum exhibits which helped to transform the space into an appropriate place to pray.

In the lead up to the exhibition a number of meetings took place to discuss preparations for managing an expected increase in Muslim visitors. Most of these discussions revolved around provisions to cater for the daily needs of the Muslim audiences, such as providing Halal food options and a space for Muslims to pray. Before the MFR, Muslim visitors who wanted to perform salat had to either leave the building and go to a local mosque or prayer room, or find a suitable quiet and clean space in the museum. However, with such an increase of Muslim visitors expected, the institution's adhoc approach was deemed inadequate as large groups of prostrating visitors may block access. According to Xerxes Mazda, the Head of Learning, Volunteers and Audiences, the decision for a prayer room was "totally pragmatic".<sup>108</sup> In other words, the need to provide a prayer space would enable Muslim visitors to come to the exhibition without worry that they would miss the authorised salat times, just as a café allows visitors to stay in the museum all day as opposed to having to leave to eat. However, Mazda affirmed that the museum did not "want to officially promote worship at the museum", adding, "we wouldn't hold a church service". The room was viewed as a practical solution to meet the needs of the audience for as long as the exhibition was running. While the temporary prayer space was signposted and mentioned in promotional material targeting Muslim audiences, its presence was understated, punctuating the museum's reluctance to encourage such worship. Yet, the British Museum's MFR provided a space that was institutionally-sanctioned, albeit for the duration of the exhibition.

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<sup>107</sup> Salat times refer to the five daily prayers Muslims perform, plus an extra session on a Friday (Jumu'ah).

<sup>108</sup> Discussed at a meeting with Xerxes Mazda on 11 October 2011.



Figure 17: MFR with the qibla protruding on the left (Berns 2012c)

The discussions around the MFR's requirements were equally practical, in terms of size ("big enough" for a sizeable increase in Muslim visitors), location (near the exhibition), flooring (carpeted), and privacy (i.e. "not a thoroughfare"). Appropriate options were limited, as most rooms were either already in use or were not accessible. In the end, a vacated space, that was until recently a library, was chosen. At the end of a sequence of galleries, the room provided a fairly enclosed space (see Figure 17). Whilst these discussions and the implementation of the prayer space was always in response to the expected increase in Muslim visitors, the naming and signposting of the room reflected an ambition to open the space up to all visitors (or rather avoid overtly excluding others). One of the earliest names to be considered was 'Contemplation Room', but after some consideration, the name 'Multi-faith Room' was adopted. Collins et al (2007) define a 'multi faith' room as a space that enables "the coexistence of individuals and groups of different faiths (and none), both nationally and locally". Yet, in the context of the museum, the name also sounded like that of a gallery, which inevitably led to some confusion. The name on the sign therefore carried an agency of its own, in terms of exclusion and inclusion. Although in practice the sign was often missed. Instead, it was the activities within the room (or the absence thereof) that evoked the most interesting responses, as will be explained. The name of the room was displayed twice; on a sign outside the open door and again on a panel inside the room, followed by 'Quiet please'. Despite the request for quiet, large groups that came to use the space often preceded their prayers with discussion and instruction from their group leader. Quietude was therefore intermittent, happening in the moment of prayer as opposed to a constant hush. Noise from the galleries also permeated the space through the open door, although as users of the room often went to the back of the space this was less of an issue. Outside noise is an accepted phenomenon for most public prayer spaces and so devotees are usually used to filtering out such exterior sounds.

On an online forum, a poster criticised naming a temporary prayer space at the Science Museum, London a 'prayer room', stating that if it had been called a 'reflection room' they may have used the space to rest, but under its current name they would stay away (RDFRS 2010). As discussed, names can exclude and include particular acts, and the naming of the space with a "religiously loaded" title plays a significant part in selecting what practices take place (Hewson and Brand 2011: 8). Although, explicitly assigning a room to a particular type of religious practice may help to avoid potential conflicts. For example, at the V&A Museum of Childhood the so-called 'Quiet room' has, according to their website "multiple uses: as a prayer room; a space for nursing mothers; or as a chill out space for families with children with autism" (V&A 2012). The space therefore caters to the specific needs of the museum's diverse audience, but, in practice, these activities may not necessarily coexist. A nursing mother in the room at the same time as male Muslims praying would be deemed by the latter as wholly inappropriate. The pluralist ideals of the space therefore harbour potential frictions, should these different activities confront one another.

In Peter Collins et al's (2007) study of hospital chapels and multi-faith rooms, they state that the space allocated for religious practices should be distinguishable from the other parts of the building. For the British Museum's temporary MFR, distinguishing the space from other galleries was a challenge. The similarities between the bookshelf-lined adjacent galleries (1 and 2) and the MFR, which together once made up the King's Library, provided little distinction between the spaces. The most striking difference, however, was simply that the MFR was virtually empty, with only a single bench disrupting the floor space. When not in use, it took passersby some time to figure out that the room was open to the public and that it had an intended purpose. Void of praying bodies, the visitors who just happened to wander in would often linger in the space for a couple of minutes, with some taking photographs. With its walls of wooden bookshelves, the empty room appeared to have an aesthetic and architectural attraction. A clue to the room's function was the distinct lack of seating, which (alongside the room's sign) suggested that the space was intended for Muslim prayer. In contrast to the exhibition spaces where benches are often viewed as an important component in being able to reflect and contemplate within a space, Muslim prayer involves repeated sequences of standing, bending and prostration that render benches unnecessary. (Although a single bench was provided to accommodate visitors who had difficulty with mobility). However, the room's ambience and clear floor space did not restrict other activities (spiritual or otherwise). On a number of occasions I witnessed a man meditating on the carpet. Unlike the Muslim worshippers, this man faced at a different angle to Mecca and sat in the lotus position. But, overall, the lack of seating made the room impractical for other religious, spiritual or reflective practices.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> A chaplain, from a local University, said that he would also appreciate a quiet space away from the displayed objects: "What strikes me is that all the rooms here, that I know of, are full of things. So



Figure 18: Passersby looking into the MFR (Berns 2012d)

The British Museum's MFR was mostly used by Muslim visitors. When the room was in use, people passing by the entrance would often hover by the doorway, keeping a respectful distance from those praying (see Figure 18). The space around and near the open door acted as a threshold that separated those who came to pray with those who simply wandered by. Hesitation whether to step in was often due to people missing the signpost and therefore not understanding the purpose of the room. It therefore took seeing a person in the embodied act of prayer to realise the room's function. Yet, in addition to the praying people, other objects provided clues to the room's purpose. Although, some visitors placed their shoes on bookshelves inside the space, others would often leave them by the door. The function of the MFR was therefore made evident by the combination of the praying people and their personal possessions. The visibility of these set the space materially apart from the other galleries. Passersby were evidently perplexed and intrigued by the room's activities. This was most likely due to the fact that the ritual was deemed unexpected and perhaps even out of context. The praying bodies in the MFR therefore stood in contrast to the expected images of the prostrating people at the *Hajj* exhibition. Muslim visitors, in comparison to the passersby,

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there's a lot of stimulation." The chaplain, therefore, suggested that there would be "value... in having a room with less things in or particularly calming things or even just nothing".

appeared more assured of the room's purpose as they often came to it intentionally and looked out for the sign. On the issue of those passing by, a Muslim blogger wrote: "One can pray in peace despite the occasional encroachment of an inquisitive/disorientated tourist expecting to enter another exhibit!" (Beard is Beautiful 2012). Another visitor, a British Muslim woman, who used the MFR with her husband during their visit to *Hajj*, explained that the "curious people" did not bother her as she did not "need somewhere too private". The space's inability to provide privacy was partly due to the half-open door which was necessary to enable visitors to access the room, but inevitably 'exhibited' the space to curious passersby. On an official level, the MFR was accessible to all. Yet, the hesitation witnessed by some visitors demonstrated how particular devotional activities appeared to have a claim over the space due to either the users' presence or the lack of material elements such as exhibits or furniture.

Those who used the MFR were able to create a personal space through their bodily positions and (on some occasions) their use of a prayer mat. Noha Nasser (2005), on her writings on mosques, states that the ease in creating Muslim sites of worship is "attributable to the portable nature of Islam and the simple functional requirements... (cleanliness and orientation to Mecca) which means that Muslim ritual requires no 'sacred space' and can be practised anywhere". On the issue of cleanliness, one user of the MFR stated:

Generally we take off our shoes when you go in but the carpet is quite dirty... but I have a prayer mat [and]... used the carpet at the back as it's cleaner...Generally the carpet would be further back, away from the door...Cleanliness is really important for us.

Prayer mats, when unrolled within a suitable area, provide another form of temporary prayer space. The portability that Nasser ascribes to Islam is, therefore, also attributable to the portability of the Muslim's mat, which allowed the visitor to tolerate the room's unclean carpet. Woodhead (2012: 8) also asserts that prayer mats are effective in creating "personal, 'inner' space" and thus complicit in fostering the one-to-one encounter with God that is necessary for prayer. The adjacent gallery may have also caused an issue as the MFR's open door faced displays of the Sutton Hoo collection including the ship-burial helmet. Such depictions of the human form are not usually permitted in Muslim prayer spaces. However, as the helmet (and other exhibits) were not *in* the MFR and the gallery was not visible when knelt in the direction of prayer (which pointed to the back of the empty room), the presence of these objects were not (vocally) contested. So, once again, the embodied position and orientation aided the process of making the space adequate for the religious activity.

For practising Muslims who perform salat, "daily life is punctuated by an awareness of the passage of time" (Gilliat-Ray 2010: 138). The religion is therefore active in structuring and synchronising the everyday activities of its devotees. This was especially evident at the British Museum when groups of Muslim visitors assembled at the MFR at the same moments. In or

near many mosques, the sound of the adhan would signal the time to pray. However, the adhan in the exhibition was played only to aurally evoke the ambience of Mecca (although a number of Muslim visitors mentioned that on hearing the call their first instinct was to go to pray). Consequently, visitors who wanted to perform salat had to maintain an awareness of the time during their museum visit. The effectiveness of the salat illustrates what Linda Woodhead (2012: 8) calls strategic religion's "attempts to consolidate its power through control of time". However, the museum also exerts its own controls over time in terms of issuing timed tickets and designing a room layout that made it difficult to leave partway through. To exit to pray was therefore a negotiated process between the two powers. According to Nasser (2005), the efficacy of Islam in non-Muslim countries is its ability "to appropriate the cultural norms of other cultural traditions while still preserving the cultural identity of the Muslim community". Yet, as discussed, this was a complex process which assembled the temporal structures of both the religion and the museum.



Figure 19: Qibla in the MFR (Berns 2012e)

A typical feature of Muslim prayer spaces is the qibla (direction to Mecca). In the MFR, the same qibla design that featured in the exhibition was used again. The qibla, in both spaces, consisted of a simple compass image with an arrow pointing to the word 'Mecca', which protruded from the wall at a 90-degree angle (see Figure 19). In the exhibition, the qibla was installed as a design feature and subtle reminder of the centrality of the pilgrimage's destination. However, as neither a panel text nor an artefact, the qibla often went unnoticed and was rarely mentioned in interviews. The qibla in the MFR was more frequently acknowledged not only because the MFR was so bare but because Muslim visitors to the space were more likely to look for and expect to see it. Knowing the direction of Mecca in the exhibition might have been of interest, but when one is not in prayer this information served no practical purpose. The relationship between Mecca and the exhibition and Mecca and the MFR differed substantially. The *Hajj* exhibition provided what was essentially an echo of the

pilgrimage and its sites, whereas the act of prayer within the MFR provided a personal link between the devotee and God in the here and now (irrespective of the museum locale).

It is difficult to capture hostile views about religious activities in face-to-face research as people are often reluctant to be perceived as intolerant. However, online negative views are much more freely expressed due to their anonymity. One such opinion was from a poster on the richarddawkins.net forum who wrote that the replacement of a library space with “a ‘multi-faith’ prayer room” was “a step backward for civilisation” (RDFRS 2012).<sup>110</sup> For this individual, the presence of the MFR in the space of a library was an act of succumbing to the wants of an irrational religious institution. On a similar thread on the same forum, a poster alerted the forum’s readers to a prayer room that was temporarily installed at the Science Museum (RDFRS 2010).<sup>111</sup> The post read:

How can a prayer room be held in a science museum?... Why should there be special space set aside for people to prayer [sic] in a place of education – as if there are not enough churches and mosques in London already.

Another forum user, who began their message by stating that they “know the Science Museum particularly well” (suggesting an internal insight and connection to the museum), wrote:

The ‘prayer room’ you speak of is not some specially made facility. It’s an empty gallery which is currently not being used for anything at all...When the exhibition closes at the end of this month, there’ll be something else there in its place (RDFRS 2010).

This response defends the room not as a prayer space but as a soon-to-be empty gallery. In Collins et al’s (2007) report they propose that a key requirement of a Multi-faith Room should be the “provision of defensible space”. Yet, due to the temporal nature of the space, it was the room’s non-prayer function that was defensible. The British Museum’s MFR was also temporary and therefore suggestive that the normative position of the museum is to not provide an allocated space for prayer and thus prioritise other activities. However, as with most gallery decisions, many other factors played a part.

## Space

The strength and poignancy of the connection between performing Hajj and the experience of visiting the exhibition was partly due to the ways in which the actors in the networks were

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<sup>110</sup> This website is not (officially) endorsed by Richard Dawkins.

<sup>111</sup> The prayer space was provided for the exhibition *1001 Inventions: Discover the Muslim Heritage in Our World* (21 January to 25 April 2010).

structured and stabilised. In order to explore this relationship, I call on the work of John Law and Annemarie Mol (2001). Law and Mol adopt Bruno Latour's term 'immutable mobiles', defined as a transportable actor network made of stable connections. They argue that in order to perform as a physical immutable mobile, it must exist within two forms of space, one space that is fixed and the other which enables movement. Using the concept of a ship, they explain:

the immutable mobile achieves its character by virtue of *participation in two spaces*: it participates in *both network and Euclidean space*...The immutability belongs to network space: to a first approximation the vessel does not move within this. If it did, it would stop being a vessel. But it is that immutability in network space which affords both the immutability and the mobility in Euclidean space (2001: 6).

The ship-networks not only included the vessels but also the processes and practices of navigation and maintenance. The ships, therefore, require stability in their network form (which includes both humans and non-human actors) in order to facilitate mobility across the seas. The concept of 'immutable mobiles' provides a useful perspective to explain the processes experienced at *Hajj*. Like the ships, the objects on display existed in both network and Euclidean space. However, unlike the vessels described by Mol and Law, the actors and objects associated with Mecca are dispersed geographically with some entities in situ and others in private and public collections. While the Mecca-network may be fragmented, it retains an intrinsic stability which enables certain entities to exist in other places. These dispersed entities, as I see it, include not only objects, texts, beliefs and rituals, but also the religion's adherents who pray and journey towards the same place. In Stefano Allievi's (2003) writings on 'transnational' Muslim communities, Allievi also employs the notion of mobility in his understanding of the ways in which cultural products are mobilised. "There is therefore a mobility of cultures", he writes, "but there is also the concrete mobility of individuals who carry them" (2003: 6). The 'concreteness' of the Muslim Diaspora enables these traditions and goods to move and become rooted elsewhere. Thus, both stability and mobility are required. And so, the Mecca network is both mobile (in that entities of it are transportable) and immobile as the places are fixed geographically.

The sitara and recording of the adhan, for example, were sufficiently mobile in order to allow them to travel from Mecca to the British Museum. Yet they also existed as components within the immutable network that is Mecca. The components may no longer physically exist together, but for those people who have experienced the sacred city, the connections between the objects, sounds, spaces, rituals and the divine inhabit a stable and permanent network. The stability of the immutable network is what makes the connections between the textiles, auditory elements and Mecca perceptible by those visitors who have either encountered the city or have seen it in photographs and film. The network's immutability is thus subjective as it is dependent on the knowledge and experiences of the visitors. In the museum setting, the sitara and adhan were connected to new assemblages with different

properties and levels of stability. This network included actors which enabled audiences who were less familiar with the pilgrimage to make the connection. Labels, videos, audio and photographs operated as signposts to the geographical location of Mecca to ensure the pilgrimage destination remained at the centre of the visitors' understanding of the rituals.

The immobility of Mecca differs from relics, such as those seen at *Treasures*, as relics (and their sacred quality) are also portable. Yet there is always an immutable element to the relics' networks, as certain actors remain stable, such as the associated saint, the place the reliquary was made and God. Is the exhibition network an immutable network? I would argue that as a temporary exhibition, the network lacked the same durability as Mecca, as Mecca's immobility is inherent within its spatial structure and rituals. By contrast, the exhibited objects could be said to be both mobile and mutable as they can be transported across Euclidean space and redisplayed within different narratives and contexts.<sup>112</sup> It is, therefore, unlikely that the sitara and adhan, in their subsequent placements, would retain their connections to the British Museum exhibition as for (most) people the objects' significance (as cultural, artistic and religious actors) is due to their affiliation with Hajj.

In contrast to the *Hajj* exhibition where the sacred site was remote, the British Museum's round Reading Room evoked a form of sacredness that was rooted to the location of the museum. These sacred connections were not religious like those provided by the devotional objects at *Treasures* and the references to a holy site at Hajj. Rather, the Reading Room elicited the presence of such notable readers as Karl Marx, Charles Dickens and Virginia Woolf. Since its conversion to an exhibition space, the Victorian desks (in 2013) have been concealed beneath a false exhibition floor. Yet, despite this, I often found visitors peeking into the Reading Room, uninterested by the exhibition, but keen to see the renowned library; knowing, although not seeing, that the desks were there beneath the floor. In 2007, Fiona Sibley (2007) blogging for *The Guardian*, queried the future of the converted library: "I see the Reading Room's future as not another space for art, but a vibrant, accessible shrine to the art of writing". Although not consecrated in the religious sense, the Reading Room evoked feelings of nostalgia that elicited a connection to these deceased readers in a similar way to how the relics evoked a sense of the saints. Whilst these networks of interaction were not engaged with a divine actor, similar configurations of actors, which included combinations of material and immaterial and human and non-human entities, enabled some visitors to feel a connection to the past readers within the space.

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<sup>112</sup> Although some of the objects' association with the British Museum will continue as the British Museum has collaborated with a number of other museums to run a number of similar exhibitions on Hajj. These museums include the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, the Arab World Institute (AWI) in Paris and the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, Netherlands. The exhibition, in this respect, embodies a greater sense of mobility and stability, but not to the same extent as Mecca.

## Conclusion

The visitor encounters examined at *Hajj* presented a distinctive constellation of actors, not only because of the selection of exhibits on display and the demographic profile of the visitors, but because of the ways the actor networks connected with the divine. At *Hajj*, the site of the pilgrimage destination was a constant presence in the exhibition narrative, but also in terms of my Muslim informants' memories (and aspirations) of where they (may have) experienced the intense presence of God and the Prophets. For a small minority of visitors, the objects and their personal memories (or hopes to perform the pilgrimage) provided an experience which was described as 'spiritual', which suggested that the exhibits were active in evoking more sacred encounters. These engagements enabled the visitor to experience a divine connection in the exhibition, from meditating on the Qur'anic words on the textiles from the Ka'ba to empathising with the emotional responses watched in the film. Whether the visitor experienced the sacred in the museum or thought of a time, in the past or to come, where they would perform Hajj, the site of Mecca was evoked as a central actor. And so, memories of one's own Hajj or the stories of others, became a crucial mediator through which visitors could connect to the devotional aspects of the pilgrimage at the exhibition.

The observations and interviews collated during the *Hajj* exhibition revealed a very different configuration of actors to that of *Treasures*. This was an expected find as both exhibitions, despite their common theme of pilgrimage, provided different approaches in terms of the objects presented, the audiences engaged and the interpretations of the subject matters. As discussed in the previous chapter, the physical presence of artefacts of veneration at *Treasures* prompted some visitors to engage with the objects as conduits to holy figures. At *Hajj*, objects played a smaller role as many Muslims consider their relationship to God as direct and immaterial. Instead the focal point of the exhibition was a place that (for those who practise Islam) is understood to provide that divine channel. This spatial actor was not simply another mediator in a chain that ran between the visitor, the museum and the divine. Rather, the visitors' engagements in the museum connected to a much larger spatial actor that interweaved the religious significance of the sacred sites with one's own memories, teachings and imaginings of the pilgrimage. While a small number of visitors did acknowledge a form of 'spirituality' or closeness to God in the exhibition, the visitors recognised that the experience in the museum was only a sample of what they could experience in Mecca. The museum connections to the divine were weaker, in the fact that they lacked the other entities, rites and purification rituals required for Hajj. Thus, in terms of a divine presence, the pilgrimage remained superior. My informants' resistance to identify their museum experience as 'religious' again demoted the sacred significance of the exhibition in relation to Hajj.

For the visitors I interviewed, interacting with the exhibition objects or forms of media in an exhibition could not replicate the direct and intense divine experience accessible in Mecca, because the engagements in the museum did not constitute a religious ritual. None of my

informants admitted praying in the exhibition, as the ritual of prayer usually takes place elsewhere (such as in the MFR, a mosque or at home). I therefore propose that there were two major absences in the museum experience of Hajj, the site and the accompanying rituals. Unlike veneration in Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity, the rituals associated with Hajj are site-specific. As a result, an equivalent direct divine connection was not possible. The sacred potential of the engagements on Hajj remained, in most part, at a (geographical and sacred) distance. The spatial specificity of the sacred is both central to the Muslim visitors' experience of pilgrimage and prayer and therefore a major impact on the exhibition networks. The divine link, which shaped the religious connections in the museum, thus, pre-existed the individuals' visits.

No visitor referred to their encounter with the exhibition as being more significant or spiritual than what they experienced in Mecca, nor did any of my informants present a negative experience of the rituals performed on pilgrimage. This may have been for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is likely that the visitors I spoke to wanted to present a positive impression of the pilgrimage, especially within the context of an exhibition evaluation interview, as they were conveying their experiences to a non-Muslim researcher. Secondly, it is possible that the majority of visitors who came had a positive Hajj where their spiritual and emotional needs were met and so welcomed the opportunity to revive these memories. Thirdly, the exhibition presented a successful Hajj experience whereby each ritual act was performed correctly and so by the time I interviewed the visitors, they were feeling, on the whole, very enthusiastic about the pilgrimage described. Fourthly, the majority of my informants were Sunni Muslims and, together with the ultra-conservative form of Islam practised in Saudi Arabia (often referred to as Wahhabism or Salafism), there was a clear resistance to any form of object or site-related veneration.<sup>113</sup> The divine connection encountered in Mecca was instead described as direct, unmediated and personal. The tracing of actor networks does not undermine the understanding of 'direct' and even immateriality. Instead, for this research, it was my intention to understand how direct or indirect engagements with the divine were understood and experienced and what practices, actors and mediations were involved to make them possible.

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<sup>113</sup> The exhibition's official partner was the King Abdulaziz Public Library, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom therefore had a significant influence of the way the pilgrimage and religion, as a whole, was depicted.

## chapter seven: THE BIBLE TOURS

This chapter marks a departure from the museum-organised exhibitions explored in the previous sections and instead focuses on activities at the museum that are arranged by visitors and/or external organisations. The trilogy of special exhibitions under the banner ‘Spiritual Journeys’ made the religious dimensions of the objects more explicit. However, in the permanent galleries the objects’ religious qualities are seldom the sole focus, but one of many themes explored. In contrast to *Treasures* and *Hajj*, religion generally plays a smaller role in the permanent galleries in terms of how the objects are displayed and interpreted and how the rooms are designed. For the activities described in this chapter, the externally-organised initiatives play a far more active role in managing the museum experience along particular religious lines and within a more religious social structure. For these reasons, the activities are able to bring to the fore implicit (and sometimes absent) religious and spiritual attributes within the museum. These initiatives reveal the many moments of friction and cooperation that can exist when an alternative interpretation and narrative, within the structure of a tour, is introduced to a museum. Furthermore, this chapter exemplifies a form of religious engagement which is possible in the galleries, but not in a conventional religious space as, unlike the exhibitions, the visited artefacts are mostly only accessible in museums.

The visitor-led initiatives of interest here are the ‘Bible tours’ and ‘Tanach tours’ of the museum, which visit mostly archaeological artefacts that relate to places, people, periods or specific events mentioned in the Old Testament (within the Christian and Jewish traditions) and in the New Testament.<sup>114</sup> In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British Museum played an active role in collecting artefacts and commissioning excavations in Egypt and across what is now the Middle East. A major motivation for this research was the regions’ affiliations with the places named in the Old Testament. As travel conditions improved, more artefacts were uncovered, the inscriptions of which were eventually translated, leading to the establishment of what became known as ‘Biblical Archaeology’. Although the first president of the Society for Biblical Archaeology, Samuel Birch (1872: 12), stated in the early 1870s that the scope of biblical archaeology was “not Theology”, he acknowledged that the finds would “prove an important

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<sup>114</sup> While the Rabbi-led tour was entitled the ‘Tanach Tour’, most of the Jehovah’s Witness groups were called ‘Bible tours’ or ‘British Museum tours’.

aid” to theological and biblical studies. The British Museum was also recognised as a place for teaching the Bible to the masses, as argued in the House of Commons in 1896:

the British Museum was one of the best Sunday schools in the country... No one could thoroughly understand the Bible who had not travelled in the East... but they had in the British Museum monuments of Egypt, of Assyria, and of Babylonia—ancient records referred to in the Bible itself; and after they had seen these they would understand the Bible much better than they did before (Hansard, 10 March 1896 col. 657).

These archaeological finds became a vital part in scholars’ quests to map the biblical world. The placement of these artefacts in the museum gave rise to a number of guidebooks of the British Museum’s biblical archaeology. The majority of these publications, written by enthusiasts, attempted to illustrate how the objects supported and thereby validated the biblical accounts (see: Kitchin 1890, Kinns 1891, Habershon 1909, and Jannaway 1921). The centrality of the Abrahamic Scriptures for these guidebooks was summarised by theologian Sir Robert Anderson (1909: iii) in the preface of *The Bible and the British Museum*, where he stated that the book’s “chief value will not be as a guide-book to the museum, but as a handbook to the Bible”. More recently, Day One Christian Ministries have published *Through the British Museum with the Bible* (Edwards and Anderson 2011) which follows the tradition of using the museum’s archaeology to corroborate biblical accounts. It is also designed (and used) to assist self-guided tours of the artefacts that support these claims.<sup>115</sup>

The publications on biblical archaeology at the British Museum have changed little over the last century, as many of the larger artefacts have remained in place, whilst the biblical passages they refer to have also remained the same. Although changes to labelling, interpretation and displays have been made, they have had minimal impact due to the dominant presence of the biblical text during the tours. The permanent nature of the galleries has also enabled visitors and, in particular, guides and tour operators to build long-term relationships with the objects and their placement within the tours’ narratives. Some of the guides I spoke to had run tours for over 30 years, and a few of those attending were second-generation visitors, now coming with their own children.

Today, the majority of tours are conducted either by staff from a place of worship (such as a Rabbi or member of the clergy), but most groups are led by trained guides from Jehovah’s Witness tour operators who also arrange trips to the Middle East and Egypt. These structured activities present a different mode of engaging with Scripture and museum objects. Whilst the religious teachings vary, the engagement of the objects and texts produce a fairly similar narrative across the tours in the galleries concerning the Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian empires. The main differences concern how the various tours perceive and interpret the

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<sup>115</sup> Day One also run their own tours at the British Museum, often for evangelical church groups.

Scriptures and the artefacts. For some of these groups, the Old Testament is an accurate portrayal of historical events. The artefacts can therefore be used to verify and validate these claims. For other groups, the Bible is not read as a literal text and so the artefacts merely illustrate the accounts depicted. And so central to the tours heterogeneous networks is the process of interpretation, not only of the Bible but also of the museum's objects and texts.

The tours, which took place in the museum's permanent galleries, provided a significantly different spatial framework to the previously studied exhibition spaces. Permanent galleries, particularly those at the British Museum, are designed to direct visitors to certain artefacts and panels in order to convey key messages and narratives. The gallery's theme may be, for instance, Assyrian history and art, but the tour's agenda overrides and overshadows such curatorial choices as it is the Bible which lies at the heart of each engagement due to its divine authority. Visitors on tours also navigate the museum in a different manner to those observed at the special exhibitions. A special exhibition usually presents a single route for visitors to follow so they can see as much of the collection as possible, as part of one (albeit branching) narrative. A tour is led by a guide who selects key objects to focus on and therefore involves missing most of the displays and the majority of the labels and panels. Whilst many guides use external sources, such as guidebooks, the centrality of the Bible and religious objectives adds a unique element to the physical, social and intellectual experience present in these tours.<sup>116</sup> Another significant and distinctive feature of these tours, in comparison to the previous chapters, was the mobility of the biblical texts that allowed the groups to travel to a variety of galleries. As the divine was mediated by the text the groups brought with them (either as material books or as recollected passages), the tours' engagements with God were not dependent on the museum evoking a devotional place or exhibiting religious objects. Instead they were able to create a religious experience that complied with their beliefs by assembling an array of human and non-human actors within the permanent spaces of the museum.

Activities such as museum tours are often overlooked or misread in visitor evaluations. The British Museum conducted its first self-initiated visitor survey in 1982 and 1983. Yet according to the Museum's Director of that time, David Wilson (2002), the survey omitted schoolchildren and (externally) organised tours including the popular Bible tours.<sup>117</sup> These exclusions have continued to present day. For instance, in an internal study in the museum's Early Egyptian gallery in 2012, visitors were tracked and interviewed during the week, the

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<sup>116</sup> I was informed of similar Christian led-tours at the Louvre, Paris, the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (such as those run by the Jehovah's Witness tour operator [oasisgrouptours.com](http://oasisgrouptours.com)). All of these museums have archaeological objects relating to the Mesopotamian and Ancient Egyptian empires.

<sup>117</sup> The exclusion of tour and school groups in visitor evaluations is also evident at the Smithsonian museums in Washington DC, because (according to the staff), the groups come with their own agendas and so are not subject to the same interpretation features as independent visitors.

results of which reported fairly low dwell times. However, on a weekend, multiple groups of twenty or more regularly stop at this gallery. Single gallery evaluations also fail to factor in the tour as a whole (as a prolonged, multi-gallery engagement). Similarly, evaluations often rate the success of a gallery by the attractiveness and 'holding power' of individual objects within a particular room. By isolating components within the museum, these methods may give an inaccurate picture of what features in the gallery are 'holding' the group to one place. For the tours, as will be explained, it was not the artefacts or panels that held them, but the Bible and guide which together effectively maintained the interests of the group. For these reasons, my research of the Bible tours entailed joining the groups and participating in their visit. In contrast to my field research in the exhibitions, which involved discreetly observing visitors before approaching them for an interview, the guide and groups were aware of my presence throughout the visits and of my research agenda. To gain a deeper understanding of the activities, I also interviewed a number of guides and tour attendees. Some of these tours I joined, while others were discussed retrospectively. This study also included a literature review of books around biblical archaeology as well as websites and blog entries that touched on the subject matter.

During my observations of the tours, a number of key actors arose as significant. Of particular interest was how the Bible, the labels and panels, and the archaeological artefacts, interacted during the tours. The groups themselves and how they expressed and presented their shared identity also played a crucial role in shaping the engagements. Importantly, the Bible tours presented a different relationship to the divine, as the sacred was not evoked through engagements with the objects, but through the Bible. Because of this, time and authenticity arose as significant concepts that harboured many different actors in cooperation and in conflict. To begin this examination of the tours, I will begin with the Scriptures.

### **The Bible and Hebrew Scriptures as actors**

The presence of the Bible on the tours was manifested in a variety of ways; as a physical object, as private (silent) readings and as spoken passages. The importance of the Bible's physical attendance was underlined in the title of the 1921 publication *The British Museum with Bible in Hand* by Frank G. Jannaway. The book, which is aimed at "real Bible lovers to the British Museum" (1921: 13), re-enacts a tour the author led in the galleries. Like similar guides, the book includes many biblical passages. And yet it is unclear whether the reader of this book should attempt to hold Jannaway's volume in one hand and a copy of the Bible in the other or, indeed, forgo the Bible in light of the guidebook's many quotes. (The author also suggests particular care is taken when pointing at objects with walking sticks.) As trivial as this may seem, ninety years on, the same physical negotiations are still playing out, which I experienced firsthand. As an infrequent reader of the Bible, it quickly became evident that the other tour members, all of which were Jehovah's Witnesses, were far more adept at finding passages than me. The proficiency of my fellow attendees at locating verses demonstrated

their familiarity with the Scriptures. Some of the group's Bibles were contained within zipped travel cases, for protection and easy access and, although well kept, most showed accumulated marks of devotion through regular use. Everybody, including the guide, had a Bible *in hand* (apart from the younger children), ready to be called in to action on the announcement of a chapter and verse (see Figure 20). A couple of visitors, me included, were also juggling cameras and notepads. The group's Bibles acted as a mark of identity, shared across the tour, but most importantly, each time the guide asked the group to open their Bibles, it underscored the divine authority, and thus credibility, of the verses. The embodied action of referring to one's personal Bible, which is obviously more time consuming, also mirrored the ways Witnesses' engage with Scripture during their door-to-door preaching. The activity was, therefore, connected to the attendees' religious practises outside of the museum.



Figure 20: Tour guide holding his Bible, radio microphone transmitter and a list of tour stops (Berns 2011b)

Although the Bible was not physically present on every tour, the Scriptures remained a central element. On a tour managed by a smaller Jehovah's Witness organisation, there was less expectation to turn to one's own Bible. The guide read the biblical passages from a script and only a few members held Bibles in order to turn to the correct passage, and in one case, found

the verse on their iPad. The same passages were cited, as described in the other tour, but were instead presented orally. Without the synchronised and individual readings from the attendees' own Bibles, the tour posed a more informal experience, acting more like a museum-staff led tour than a Bible lesson. Yet what set this tour apart from other museum-led activities was the expectation that the attendees were familiar with the cited passages (with the guide proclaiming, "You're Bible students so you will know this"). This group may not have physically held the Bible, but an embodied, intellectual and religious relationship with the text was presumed, as the guide's words of encouragement suggested. On a 'Tanach Tour' led by an Orthodox Rabbi of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement, the Rabbi also read the passages from the Old Testament from a script.<sup>118</sup>

However, unlike the Jehovah's Witness tours mentioned, the group members were asked to study identified passages from the Old Testament (or Tanach) prior to their visit. This request helped to ensure that attendees arrived with the same references and knowledge about the events that featured on the tour. Other (Christian) groups were observed holding printed handouts containing photographs of the objects alongside biblical passages. Again the centrality of the scriptures was manifested, but without the material presence of the Bible.

The Bible played a fundamental role in the interactions observed as it provided the tours with their sacred connection. The archaeological artefacts, by contrast, helped to illustrate the discussed biblical events. Yet none of the tour attendees or guides described the museum objects as having any sacred or ritual qualities. Rabbi Michael conducts tours of the British Museum as part of his (reform) synagogue's education programme for those converting to Judaism. In an interview he explained the groups' relationships to the objects:

We're not visiting these things as relics. There's no sense of that these are religious items... The fundamental thing in Judaism is text. That's the root into a relationship with God and without those texts you don't really have that.

For Rabbi Michael the sacred agency of the Scriptures is only manifested through the Word (of God). Without the connection to God (through the text) the relationship between the Bible, the tour members and the objects would break. Prior to the British Library opening in 1998, the British Museum displayed a number of sacred manuscripts, which were featured on the tours in order to discuss the history and survival of the canonical books. The museum also exhibited a piece of textile that once wrapped one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This object is no longer accessible to the public, whilst the manuscripts are now on display at the British Library. Rabbi Michael admitted that the textile fragment in particular created "a different sort

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<sup>118</sup> Chabad Lubavitch is a Hasidic movement within Orthodox Judaism that promotes strict adherence to the Torah and Jewish law (Karesh and Hurvitz 2005).

of moment” on the tour, which related to the religious rituals of the religion as opposed to the plight of the Israelites represented by the archaeological finds. For the same reason, Rabbi Michael called his tour of the British Library “much more of a religious experience”. For the Rabbi, the sacred books are understood to have sacred qualities, but on considering the artefacts of the British Museum, he confessed that he could not think of any equivalent sacred object on display. Judaism, as an aniconic tradition, actively resists perceiving any material object as having a role in sacred mediations. However, in practice this becomes a complicated matter as holy texts are often presented as material objects. These material texts, whether they are books or manuscripts, become imbued with religious meaning and significance, which lead to their involvement in specific rituals that determine when, where, how and by whom the Scriptures can be read (see Holden 2002 and Stollow 2010). Although most of the museum’s archaeological artefacts do not bear the Word of God, they are religiously meaningful to the tours that visit them because they relate to the Word. Thus, the guides work to weave the museum’s archaeological collections into the biblical accounts, all the while underscoring the centrality of the Scriptures. Hence, the bible-artefact connections are not intrinsic to the objects but forged through the tours’ interactions and repeated biblical references.

In an interview with the tour guide and founder for the main Jehovah’s Witness operator (which I will refer to as JW Tours from here on), he explained the central role that the Scriptures played in the tours: “These stones are not the basis of our faith”, he told me, “Our faith is based on the Bible. These are known as Bible tours not archaeological [tours]”. The founder was reluctant to over-state either the significance of the artefacts in affirming the validity of the biblical accounts or the museum in the attendees’ relationship with the Bible. However, in the tour’s promotional literature, the museum visits are described as “faith strengthening tours” that “give praise to Jehovah”. This description acknowledges the value of the museum in reinforcing the Bible’s message and providing a space to reflect on the actions and words of the divine.

For the tours, the mobility of the Bible was key. Whether read directly from the holy book or as extracted passages from a script, the oral presentation of the Bible transformed the visits.<sup>119</sup> In the everyday practises of Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Bible does not command any particular rituals and can therefore be read anywhere. The fact that the Bible is regarded in this way means that it can be transported with the individual, to be called upon at any time. Having the Bible physically with them gives the Witness access to the authority of the text. The founder of JW Tours explained:

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<sup>119</sup> A number of tours also provided the attendees with handouts and online resources. For example, the Orthodox Rabbi advised his attendees, in an online document, to read passages from the Tanach prior to their visit, while the evangelical guide Jay Smith gave his tour group printed handouts featuring images and biblical passages.

The Bible [is] not something sacred... that we should be in a certain position or a certain place to read it. These are words. These were written for our benefit to be educated by the Creator... How would you know his name unless you read?

The Bible tours, by their very nature, reflect the groups' preoccupation with text, which is typical of the Jehovah's Witness and Jewish traditions.<sup>120</sup> Objects and images are, therefore, afforded less significance and viewed with no intrinsic religious value. Yet for some (but not all) of the tours, corroborating the events in the Bible with archaeological findings adds weight. While the archaeological evidence was said to be unnecessary for those who already believe the Bible as a literal work, such external 'proof' seemed to be important in defending and reinforcing the events for people outside of the faith (especially for those who doubt or reject the biblical accounts). For instance, a Jehovah's Witness tour attendee told me that he frequently referred to the museum tours in his missionary work. He stated:

When we are door-to-door witnessing, very often I mention the things that I've been seeing here [at the British Museum] as a proof [*trails off*]... to prove that this is something we have to get more knowledge about.

The visitor's remark demonstrated a reluctance to say that these objects 'prove' the Bible, as the Bible is said to be self-validating within the Witness traditions. The comment also revealed how Witnesses' prepare for anticipated questions and doubts about their religion's monotheistic teachings.<sup>121</sup> More generally, the tours provided an important role in visitor's religious education and on a number of occasions the tour members were referred to as 'students'.

Understanding the relationships between the different Bibles brought to the museum is again made comprehensible through the use of ANT. The presence of the Bible was manifested in a variety of ways during the tours I attended; as physical objects, as private readings and as spoken passages. Dutifully tracing the networks of interaction between people, things and concepts, I made the observation that the physical Bibles not only acted independently of each other (in personal engagements with their owners), but often worked in unison under the direction of the guide. That is not to say that the Bibles were experienced as the exact same entity. On the contrary, the Bible, or indeed any text, can be encountered in many different ways: as historical accounts, as sacred texts, as the reason for the production and safekeeping of artefacts and artworks, and as acquisitions (in the form of books and

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<sup>120</sup> The tours' privileging of the Word is part of the same process of dematerialisation that shaped the British Museum. Although, while the Protestant ideologies that informed the Museum are now often overlooked (and misread as secular), the Protestant attitude towards the material is expressed explicitly on the tours.

<sup>121</sup> Unlike the Witnesses, Judaism is not an evangelistic religion and so does not proselytise.

manuscripts). While these interactions varied considerably, the biblical text provided a common thread that tied them all together. However, the Bible was also a mediator to the divine word and so, for the Jehovah's Witnesses (and other sects and denominations within the Abrahamic faiths), the most significant actor, that held the bonds between the Bibles in place, was God. It was therefore through performances and practices with the text that the different experiences of the Bible connected to one another. Although the Bible in the museum was entwined within many religious and nonreligious realities, conceptions and interpretations, when the text was experienced within the practice of faith, the Bible acted as one entity. The Bible was therefore an actor and a network of actors, all of which answered to the same name.<sup>122</sup>

## Labels and panels

Most galleries at the British Museum operate on the idea that visitors are object-led. For the recently re-designed galleries, staff identified specific exhibits to stand out as 'star' or 'gateway' objects to communicate the gallery's key themes. According to Anna Bright (2011) of the British Museum, gateway objects:

work on the principle that people are drawn to objects rather than text. By placing important contextual information in close proximity to a key object, we increase the likelihood that visitors will read that information.

By contrast, on the tours, the key 'text' was not the galleries' panels and labels but what the attendees and guides brought with them, whether it was the Holy Scriptures or a guidebook. Due to the presence of their chosen text, visitors on tours had little opportunity to view other exhibits or be influenced by the museum's interpretative strategies such as labels and panels, unless directed. For these tours the relationship between the (biblical) texts and the objects essentially reversed. The objects became the contextual information. The guides occasionally pointed to the labels and panels, especially when they presented inscriptions or a map of one of the region's discussed. The labels and panels were also called upon to add authority to the biblical accounts, provide an (sometimes-disputed) alternative view or offer additional background, but only if they helped to support the guides' claims.

A common stop on the Bible tours is Room 10b, 'Assyria: Siege of Lachish', a room of reliefs from the South-West Palace of Sennacherib which depict the capture of Lachish in 701 BC. Only two of the gallery's panels mention the reliefs' theological relevance, as the room's primary focus is on Assyrian history. The two references are made in a series of panels, entitled "The Capture of Lachish", with the first simply stating that "there are references to

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<sup>122</sup> Brian Malley (2004) came to a similar conclusion in regard to the multiplicity of the Bible which he recognised as both a "text-artifact" and as abstract texts.

Sennacherib's invasion in the Bible". The second provides the relevant verse ("2 Kings 18") and states that the Bible "records that Sennacherib was based at Lachish while negotiating Hezekiah's submission". The labels below the reliefs describe the scenes themselves, including the methods of warfare and torture. However, one label, for a relief depicting three musicians, makes reference to the Bible. It reads: "The scene recalls the biblical lament (Psalm 137) referring to a late period: 'they that carried us away captive required of us a song'". This popular psalm, which begins with the line "By the rivers of Babylon", alludes to a different timeframe, in a different land, but with a similar sentiment. On one of the Assyria-focused tours I attended, the Jehovah's Witness guide pointed to this label, and announced: "The museum says read Psalm 137", for which the group obliged. The decision of which biblical passage to read was, thus, shared with the museum in order to strengthen the claim for truth.<sup>123</sup> The guide also pointed out the reference to the Second book of Kings, as mentioned on the panel, before turning to the verse. On a tour led by the independent (Evangelical) guide Jay Smith, for a group of Southern Baptists, Smith pointed to one of the panels entitled 'The iron age kingdom: Israel and Judah' and explained that the museum had "paraphrased the story straight out of the Bible and put it on the walls" (see Figure 21).<sup>124</sup> Turning to the group, he asked "Why would they do that?". To this a member of the group announced that the Bible 'is historical' (Fillymonn 2008).<sup>125</sup> Agreeing with this comment, Smith exclaimed that the Bible is "becoming so historically accurate that [the museum is] even quoting from it." For Smith, the panel's similarity with the biblical account demonstrated the museum's acceptance of the Bible (and God's) verity. And yet, overall the labels featured very little in the tours, leaving it to the guides (and their books) to bring together the relevant passages before the artefacts.

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<sup>123</sup> Jay Smith also passed the task of revealing corroborations to the museum. In the Nineveh gallery, Smith explained that no sources besides the Bible mention who attacked Nineveh, stating that, "so many historians have believed this is nothing more than fiction...until the British Museum discovered him... You want to know who he is? I'm not going to tell you. I'm going to let the British Museum tell you".

<sup>124</sup> The gallery panel explains the "poor and ill-documented" period from the time the Egyptians withdrew from Canaan (in the 12th century BC) up until the first recorded reference of the kingdom of Judah in the 8th century BC. The panel also mentions King Ahaz (who is named in the Bible) but does not identify the Bible as a source.

<sup>125</sup> I did not attend Jay Smith's tour of the British Museum in person but viewed it on Youtube.

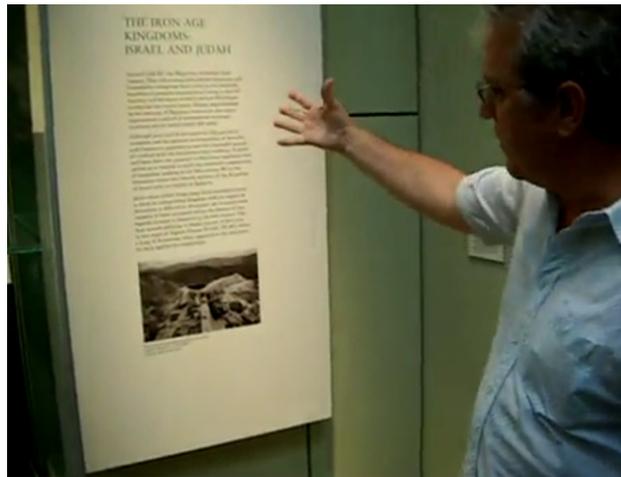


Figure 21: Jay Smith discussing a panel (Fillymonn 2008)

In other museum panels, references to people and places in the Scriptures were prefaced with the word 'biblical' as in "biblical Noah", the "biblical Tower of Babel" and the "biblical Hebrews". This demonstrated the museum's attempts to draw boundaries between religious knowledge (based within the Scriptures) and information drawn from scientific enquiry. In these panels, the Bible is presented as the secondary evidence in support of the accounts depicted in the inscriptions and artefacts. A similar policy was employed at *Treasures* whereby certain accounts of saints were introduced with the words "according to legend", while descriptions of the miracles associated with their relics were preceded with "in the belief that". Similarly, at *Hajj*, a number of sentences began with "according to Islamic belief" and "Muslims believe", which not only made a distinction between two systems of truth but also set apart the beliefs of one religion from other religions. Once again, these examples show the museum's wariness around endorsing or legitimising theological interpretations and accounts.

The Bible's peripheral role in the gallery reflects the relationship between the artefacts and Scripture, as observed in Timothy Larsen's (2009: 78) article on biblical archaeology in the Victorian period. In the article, Larsen states that whilst modern-day biblical scholars frequently describe Assyriology as a field where "the Bible is in the foreground and ancient Mesopotamia provides a context", Assyriologists were in fact doing the opposite. The objects, Larsen argues, were in the foreground and the Bible was "a source that might illuminate them" (2009: 78). References to the Bible in the museum's panels and labels today are also performing this switch, with the object as the key actor and the biblical content playing a marginal role. The switch demonstrates the priorities of the galleries' narratives, but also mirrors the curators and researchers' concerns (around religious knowledge), which date back to the objects' rediscoveries.



Figure 22: Phoenician plaque (Berns 2011c)

The guides also refer to the panels in order to share the responsibility for determining what is significant and relevant. For example, on a JW Tour within the Ancient Levant galleries, the guide pointed to a small plaque of a woman's face, and stated that "The British Museum label is very telling". The label for the small plaque (Figure 22) read: "A woman looking out of a balustraded window was a popular Phoenician theme, possibly connected with the goddess Astarte and ritual prostitution".<sup>126</sup> The guide then proceeded to read a passage from the Bible that described how the Phoenician queen Jezebel "paint her eyes with black paint and do her head up beautifully and to look down through the window" (2 Kings 9: 30).<sup>127</sup> Explaining Jezebel's actions as those of a prostitute, the guide pointed to the label beside the plaque, and declared: "This prostitute is viewed as wonderful, as art... and as a prostitute is how she's remembered". Although the object's label makes no indication that it is Jezebel (as it is probably not), its inclusion within the tour provided a visual representation of the sins that were committed at the times corresponding to the biblical accounts. The story of Jezebel was therefore evoked in order to illustrate the consequences for either ignoring or defying God's

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<sup>126</sup> Paulette McManus (1989: 175) found that when visitors encounter museum objects in groups, one member of the group usually takes on the task of reading the label/panel texts (by directly quoting or paraphrasing). McManus dubbed this practice as 'text-echo', whereby the text "is introduced as a partner in [the visitors] discourse". In the context of the tour, this echoing also applied to the Bible text.

<sup>127</sup> As worded in the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society 1981).

commands. The plaque was, therefore, implicitly referred to as evidence that such activities were present at that time and in those locales. However, as this connection was weak, the label was mentioned in order to provide additional authority to the claim.

The JW Tours frequently pointed out a number of objects that underscored the same point (often to do with pagan rituals) in order to build a stronger case of supporting ‘evidence’ through the accumulation of artefacts. To emphasise the profusion of religious symbols during the time of the Israelites, one Jehovah’s Witness guide pointed out the halo-like nimbus behind the head of Sekhmet, an Egyptian Goddess (see Figure 23) as a reference to sun worship. He then presented a photograph of the Pope with a sunburst monstrance (similar to Figure 24). Holding the photograph up to the statue, the guide proclaimed: “It’s blatant sun-worship... [and] nothing to do with Jesus”. Tracing these perceived pagan symbols, to a time when God Himself was believed to have forbidden such practices, was a crucial component of the tours.



Figure 23: Statue of Sekhmet (Lenka P 2008)



Figure 24: Pope Benedict XVI with a sunburst monstrance (Telegraph 2011b)

One of the noticeable points of contention between the Bible (or the tour’s interpretation of the Bible in light of biblical scholarship) and the museum concerned the dating of objects and

events. On two of the Jehovah's Witnesses tours I attended we passed the naturally-preserved body of a Late-Predynastic Egyptian man displayed with a collection of grave goods, which the label states is dated to "about 3400 BC". The JW Tours guide referred to the date on the label and asked "Can we be sure of that?". The group looked around unconvinced, which prompted the guide to explain that the date "would put [the body] before the Flood so that wouldn't make sense". According to the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society (1969: 324) literature the biblical Flood took place in 2370BC and so "Egyptian history must have begun after that date". A member of the tour, visiting from the Netherlands, stated his surprise at the label's dating:

When we looked at the dead body that was supposed to be dated from 3400 before Christ, I was amazed... [and] I said to my wife, "I'm not sure because this is before the Flood"... So I agree with the guide, perhaps there has been some misdating.

The rejection of the museum's dating in favour of the biblical teachings demonstrate how some factors within religious understanding fail to coexist with the museum's interpretation, but lie in conflict. Only one chronology can be correct and so the struggle is often presented below the surface of the tours when the groups are confronted with particularly ancient artefacts. On all of the (Jewish and Jehovah's Witness) tours, the guides made passing comments and asked (reciprocal) questions to cast doubt on the museum's labelling. However, the group of Dutch visitors began to question the validity of the dates amongst themselves. The purpose of the tour with the Egyptian body was an exploration of the pagan customs that infiltrated Christianity (including the trinity, the symbol of the cross and the halo). With this in mind, the Dutch visitor confessed that, "even if [the museum date is] true the customs have been there so long". For this visitor, the date on the label may have led him to doubt the Bible's chronology, but the presence of the grave goods were still effective in exposing the existence of the Ancient Egyptians' belief in the immortality of the soul – a custom that is vehemently rejected by the Witnesses.

In the encyclopaedic *Insight* volumes, published by the Jehovah's Witness' body WatchTower, many of the objects which feature in the tours of the British Museum are mentioned and pictured, including the Epic of Gilgamesh Flood tablet (which the British Museum date to 700-600 BC). In a discussion around the dating of the Flood the authors of *Insight* state:

According to Bible chronology, the global Flood of Noah's day occurred in 2370 B.C.E. Archaeologists have assigned dates earlier than this to numerous clay tablets they have excavated. But these clay tablets are not dated documents. Hence the dates that have been assigned to them are merely conjectural and provide no solid basis for establishing a relationship in time to the biblical Flood (WatchTower 2012).

Again, we see a difference in how the 'internal' evidence of the Bible is read in comparison to the academic research conducted by the museum. In 2010, *The Guardian* reported that "a British Museum expert" translated another flood story on a 3,700 year-old clay tablet

(Kennedy 2011). The news was picked up by a number of Christian bloggers, including Adrian Bates (2010) at creation.com, who wrote:

The adept translator was Irving Finkel, a British Museum cuneiform expert. Perhaps stepping outside his area of expertise, he also pronounced his belief that the Genesis Flood account was cobbled together from Babylonian stories by the Jewish exiles in Babylon. That's a bit novel but hey, it doesn't really matter, just so long as the historicity of the Genesis account is denied. Obviously such denial is not an option for Christians.

While the tours I attended embraced the museum's identification of the Mesopotamian flood tablet as further evidence that the Flood occurred as the Bible described, bloggers such as Bates instead focused on the museum's view that both the Babylonian and Genesis accounts are stories, with the former influencing the latter. The acceptance and rejection of external information, therefore, is dependent on the biblical context, and whether it supports and questions the Bible's accounts, and also how the research is incorporated into the biblical narrative.

The tours' encounters with the museum labels and panels differed substantially to the visitor experiences discussed in the previous chapters. At both *Hajj* and *Treasures*, a proportion of religious visitors entered the exhibitions feeling particularly sensitive (and sometimes apprehensive) about how their religion and rituals would be represented and interpreted by others outside of their faith. At *Treasures*, a number of visitors took offence to how their devotional practices were depicted in the labels. By contrast, the tour guides, and possibly some of the attendees, entered the museum knowing what labels they may have to challenge or the texts they could ignore altogether. The tours therefore had the tools and means to anticipate and deal with points of conflict.

The guides' careful selection and management of the tours occasionally worked to actively neutralise the gallery space. Although the museum is in no way a blank canvas for groups to impose their agenda, some guides were able to control many elements of the museum experience through strategically handpicking what objects and labels to visit. However, some museums are more malleable than others. For example, some of the Witnesses also run tours at the Natural History Museum, an institution which presents a clear commitment to evolutionary theory, and requires, according to one of the tour members, a more active response in order to "counteract" the Museum's "anti-God" and pro-evolution interpretation.<sup>128</sup> In the majority of the British Museum's galleries, the interpretations rarely

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<sup>128</sup> This counteracting was also present in the early 20th century. In the preface to Habershon's book *The Bible and the British Museum*, Sir Robert Anderson (1909: iii) proclaimed that the aim of the book was to attack "Higher Criticism" and its attempts "to get rid of the miraculous – that is, of the Divine element in Scripture".

take a position on whether the Holy Scriptures are perceived as fact or fiction. Therefore, with the exception of the dates, there is less need to “counteract” the British Museum’s position to the same degree. However, the case is very different in the Enlightenment Gallery, which is designed to emulate and explain the ways objects were displayed and classified in the 18th century. Like the Natural History Museum, the Enlightenment Gallery endorses a rationalist progression narrative.<sup>129</sup> The gallery also has a section on the ‘Search for Babylon’ which, the panel states, addresses the growing interest and ambition “to find the ruins of these cities, famous from descriptions in the Bible”. Although the cases display many objects bearing the names and places in the Old Testament, none of the tours I attended included this section. I therefore asked one of the Jehovah’s Witness guides why he did not take the group to the ‘Search for Babylon’ exhibits. The guide stated that he was not aware of the displays. As many of the guides have been running tours for over 30 years (and rely on guidebooks that are far older), it is possible that the Enlightenment Gallery, which opened in 2003, does not factor as it is relatively new and does not provide any objects that better demonstrate the tours’ agendas than what is displayed in the other galleries. However, it is also probable that because the interpretations and displays in the Enlightenment Gallery are more concerned with the discovery, collection and trade (as well as the proliferation of fake artefacts) in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, it would be far more challenging to discuss the artefacts within the context of the ancient empires.

## Identity and community

The Bible tour groups created a very different social dynamic to other activities within the museum. While the guides state that visitors from other faith groups are welcome on their tours, there is an expectation amongst the groups that everyone attending will have the same beliefs and practise the same religion. For instance, in the previously mentioned guidebook by Frank Jannaway (1921: 13), he states that his book is aimed at those visitors who:

are really interested in God’s dealings with the Earth and Man in the past, present and future, and are not merely one of the thoughtless and godless multitude, whose chief aim in life seems to be to eat, drink and be merry, because to-morrow they die.<sup>130</sup>

Jannaway’s abhorrence for the ‘godless’ not only indicates his animosity to the nonreligious but also of those who do not acknowledge divine teachings in their everyday lives. Similarly, the Bible-orientated agenda of the tours leads one to assume that the groups are in broad

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<sup>129</sup> In a section on Fossils a panel states: “In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most people relied on the Bible for the history of the world and believed that the universe had been created by God in 4004 BC.” Although the British Museum presents this view of the Creation in the past, some visitors continue to subscribe to this understanding of the Earth’s dating.

<sup>130</sup> The final line paraphrases biblical passages 1 Corinthians (15: 32) and Isaiah (22: 13).

agreement about how the Scripture is to be read and related to.



Figure 25: Bible tour name badge (Berns 2011d)

The shared identity and sense of community amongst the pre-determined groups was also manifested in the ways the tour members look and behave. On a Saturday, the Jehovah's Witness tours are particularly visible as they congregate in the Great Court. Members of the tours are given name badges, with a space to name their Congregation and, on some tours, handed headsets. The badges not only made the members identifiable to each other but to other visitors in the galleries (Figure 25). The holding of the Bible, as mentioned earlier, also distinguished the tour members from the other visitors. As Jeremy Stolow (2007: 328) notes, even a closed book "possesses communicative possibilities that are materialized on its outermost surface". Thus, whether held open or closed the Bible was always communicating both as a shared bond within the group and as a mark of identity to outsiders. The website for JW Tours stipulates that attendees should dress as they do for meetings. At the end of the tours, the guides dutifully complimented their groups on dressing smartly (and modestly). "People do recognise us as Jehovah's Witnesses", said one of the guides. The operator was therefore conscious of their collective image. The requested dress code also mirrored the way the attendees dressed for their meetings, which made a distinction between the tour and an ordinary visit to a museum (for leisure). The Orthodox Jewish tours, in contrast, were not provided badges to wear or text to hold; instead the men's skullcaps (kippot) and women's modest dress, again made them visible as a group.

The use of particular words and names also differentiated the tours from other visitors and from one another. The Jehovah's Witnesses mostly referred to each other as 'brothers and sisters', creating a temporary sense of community. "We feel globally connected", one attendee remarked, "you have that sense even at the museum". The visitor explained that as Jehovah's Witnesses they shared not only the same beliefs and values, but a language to express themselves that he described as a "sixth sense". The Witnesses also read from the same Bible version and as the focus and subject matter of the Witnesses' 'meetings' (services) are established by a single governing body, every meeting around the world follows the same content. Because of this, the tour guides were able to refer to the biblical accounts and passages recently covered in the attendees' previous meetings. The shared experience of the tour therefore preceded the attendees' visit to the museum and this, again, centred on their interactions with the Bible. Stolow (2007: 319) found a similar scenario in Judaism:

Through their routine use in public ritual and for study, these works offer the congregation a means of reproducing itself in time and space, according to the rhythms of the ritual calendar, and through networked affiliations with other congregations, in other places, engaged with the same books.

The Jehovah's Witness guides also cited publications produced by WatchTower as the guides could assume that the majority of the attendees would know and own these supplementary texts. These shared references, whether they were in the form of books, Bible classes or terminology, created a stronger social network amongst the attendees. Similarly, on the tour led by the Rabbi, the guide explained that he often used the Hebrew terms for the Old Testament as the attendees "would find it strange for me to speak about 'Genesis' and 'Exodus'". Once again, the choice of words acted as a mark of difference.

The ancestral connection to the past was an important part of the tour for many of the Jewish groups. The guides I interviewed both described the personal nature of their visits. The Orthodox Rabbi guide explained:

[The collection] illustrates something which is personal to me and illustrates a part of my ancestry, so that distinction - historical and devotional - is not a valid distinction in the same way as, for example, a British Christian looking at an artefact from first century Palestine... [I] encourage people to see the Tanach as the introductory chapter... to their autobiography.

For some tour members, acknowledging that ancestral link with the Israelites mentioned in the Bible was intrinsic to their faith and identity, and, part of their relationship to the divine. The members of these tours, who saw the Israelites as their ancestors, described feeling empathy towards the mistreatment of the Jews. In 1914, Sir John Abraham Jacob de Villiers (1914: 42), Deputy Keeper of the British Museum's Printed Books Department, ended his lecture on museum objects of Jewish interest with the following words: "We are of a race that

walked amidst these stones when they were alive with the peoples of the past—we are the still living cement that holds these dead stones together”. Just as De Villiers described, the visitors who walked amongst the artefacts in the museum, and recognised their familial connection with those mentioned in the Scriptures, were enmeshed within the same network.<sup>131</sup> The ancestral connection was also significant to a tour organised by a London-based Buddhist Meditation group who visited the museum in 2011. The visit, which encompassed the Chinese Buddhist and Indian Mahayana artefacts, was led by the group’s organisers and aimed to give “Buddhists in a western society” an understanding of the religion’s history and the role that “our Buddhist ancestors” played. The tour followed a chronological sequence, tracing the development of Buddhism across time. The ancestral link was of a very different kind to that described for the Jews, and yet it provided a personal connection to the historical narrative of which they were now part.

Parents I met on the tours often told me that they brought their children in order to provide an additional and possibly more stimulating view of the biblical accounts. Families therefore made up a large proportion of the groups. Catherine who attended one of the JW Tours with her eight year-old son explained:

When you’re young, you don’t want to just sit down and read... To see it and look at it, you remember it more... But whatever beliefs you’ve got, whatever religion you are, you need to study it properly and know the background of it and why it says what it says in the Bible.

For Catherine, learning about the customs during the periods covered in the Old Testament helped her and her son make an “educated choice” about how they lived their life and how they followed Jehovah. The tours also offered many parents a presentation of history that was in keeping with their beliefs. This was the case for Angela. I met Angela, who described herself as Anglican, at one of the British Museum’s family workshops in March 2011, which she attended with her young home-schooled children. The workshop, entitled ‘Multimedia Magic’, focused on the Buddhist objects within the China, South Asia and Southeast Asia gallery. Although, Angela later admitted that she did not realise that the workshop would centre on Buddhism when she booked the event. She also confessed that she was uncomfortable exposing her young children to other belief systems at such an impressionable age. In a conversation during the workshop, she explained that she and her family had visited the British Museum previously as part of a Christian Bible tour. In contrast to the workshop, the externally-organised Bible tour gave an account of history that supported her pre-existing

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<sup>131</sup> During the Rabbi’s Tanach tour, they visited the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan’s archives where a curator had laid out a selection of objects that, the Rabbi explained, related to the experience of the Jews as foreign captives within Egypt. Although the curator was keen to point out that it was not known who made and used the objects.

religious beliefs and complied with the doctrines she wished to teach her family. In her attempt to minimise the corrupting influence the workshop could have on her children, Angela called upon the biblical text. Towards the end of the workshop, each child was asked to create a multimedia collage using video and photographs of the visited Buddhist statues and artefacts. On her daughter's collage Angela added a speech bubble that included the following biblical passage from John 14: 16, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No man cometh unto the Father, but by me". The collage therefore operated in a similar way to the Bible tours, by using the Word of God to oppose acts of idolatry. However, unlike the tours that arrive at the museum prepared to counter conflicting views, it took Angela some time to find a way to challenge and reject the Buddhist beliefs and practices discussed during the workshop's activities.

Doering and Pekarik (1996) refer to the knowledge and dispositions visitors bring to museums as their 'entrance narratives'. These narratives encompass the visitors' established beliefs and perceptions about the world as well as their personal experiences and emotions that support and reinforce their understandings. They state:

When visitors encounter the contents of an exhibition, they necessarily place them within the narrative that they have previously constructed to explain objects and ideas of this type... and they certainly do not intend to have their narratives radically revised. Instead, they want their narratives to be confirmed... Things that don't fit, that cannot be resolved, are usually deeply disturbing and are generally avoided and forgotten or distorted until they do fit (1996: 21).

As illustrated in the previous scenario, the inclusion and discussion of the Buddhist objects during the family workshop posed a conflicting narrative that Angela had not prepared to encounter that day. Although she was able to incorporate the biblical quote in to the workshop's activity in order to bring the focus back to the Word of God, this was a reactive measure. The tours, by contrast, proactively minimised the risks of encountering alternative or contradictory information through the guides' careful selection of what to visit and what to miss out.<sup>132</sup> When the groups came across alternative views, they were challenged and incorporated into the tours' narrative and agenda. Through this, the attendees' museum experience was able to conform to their religious teachings. Also significant (in contrast with Angela's experience of the workshop) was the fact that the guides and tour operators shared the same beliefs as the attendees, which, again, decreased the potential for experiencing

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<sup>132</sup>James Greig, an evangelical Christian minister who leads tours in the British Museum, described the advantage of using a guide who can "take you to the important things, to cut through... all the rows and galleries and rooms and take you straight through to things that really matter in your life" (JGreigful 2010).

radically different views. In comparison, at *Hajj* many of the Muslim visitors I spoke to positively described how the exhibition reflected their understandings of the Islamic pilgrimage. However, their enthusiasm was less about reinforcing and confirming their own understandings of the ritual than ensuring their faith was accurately represented to others. The perception and presence of alternative views and beliefs were therefore central in framing the Muslim visitors' experiences of the exhibition. Although the tours discussed differing perspectives, they did so in a general sense (for example, when discussing the continuation of idol worship). Unlike the visitors to *Hajj*, the tour attendees had little or no opportunity to encounter the perceptions of other visitors.

## Role of time

The relationship between the Bible tours and the divine share a number of similarities with the studied special exhibitions, particularly in respect to time. For many of the interviewed Muslim visitors to *Hajj*, the exhibition on the Islamic pilgrimage collapsed the time between their exhibition visit and their own journey to Mecca. Similarly, at *Treasures*, the practice of relic veneration evoked the presence of the holy figures into the here and now, particularly in respect to the saint's martyrdom or Christ's Passion. For the Bible tour attendees, expanses of time also collapsed and folded but, on these occasions, it was between the present and the ancient periods of the biblical events. On one of the JW Tours, the guide even asked his group to imagine themselves as Israelites living in Ancient Egypt. The visitors' connections to God were therefore mediated through a combination of texts and objects from these early periods, framed by the Bible. Although the Jehovah's Witnesses' practices and beliefs differ in many ways to the ancient Jews, they do share the Old Testament. The social construction of time, thus, played a significant role in the tours. Yet, as described, time was also a key point of contention between the museum's presentation of history and the accounts recorded in the Bible. By strategically selecting biblical passages and artefacts for discussion, and circumventing many of the museum's interpretations, the guides were (almost) able to present a visiting experience that avoided conflicts with contradictory sources and, thus, fulfilled the groups' needs and expectations.

On a number of the tours, some of the guides suggested that the objects on display may have encountered people named in the Bible. For example, a tour guide from the evangelical organisation GGICM (God's Gift International Christian Ministries) stated, while standing before a painted panel from the palace of Susa, that Esther "would have walked passed this [panel] on the way to see the king" (Chandler 2012).<sup>133</sup> Similarly, tour guide Jay Smith said that Esther "possibly ate out of" one of the displayed Persian silver plates (Fillymonn 2008). Such claims not only attempted to connect the attendees to Esther but also to the time God was an

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<sup>133</sup> I did not attend GGICM's tour of the British Museum in person but viewed it on Youtube.

active and vocal presence. This connection was, therefore, dependent on the belief in the existence of that moment between the artefact in the museum and the person *in* the Bible. Eliade (1959) described what he called 'sacred time' as a reactualisation of a sacred event that took place in the past. The veneration of relics could be said to involve this process of reactualising a time made sacred (often by the moment a holy figure is martyred). However, in contrast to the practice of veneration, which depends on the belief that the relic is endowed with sacred qualities, reflecting on an artefact's possible connection to a biblical figure did not seem to endow the artefact with any supernatural power. Instead the guides' suggestions underscored the claim that these events happened with real people and in real places. The emphasis was, therefore, on demonstrating the veracity of God's Word.

The tours' abilities to help attendees reflect on the time of God's instructions, as depicted in the Old Testament, was particularly poignant for JW Tour attendee Catherine. Catherine explained that seeing the actual artefacts used in customs that (she believed) God directly prohibited helped her to explain why she had chosen to avoid certain objects and rituals. She stated:

You can see how when God wrote don't do this or don't take part in this, you can see exactly where it was and why he's put don't do it... [And] you can see why [other cultures] believed in an afterlife and what God thought about it.

The tour, Caroline continued, helped justify why she avoided certain present-day 'distractions', as she knew "the reasons why and the background to it... because you've looked into it that much and made an educated choice". This process was aided by the guides' frequent remarks about the similarities between the ancient customs and contemporary symbols and rituals. By quoting the Bible and, more specifically, God's commands, the message was strengthened.

The Witnesses, under the direction of their guides, frequently related the lessons learnt in the tours to present day. These lessons often involved making connections between past pagan practices and contemporary threats and distractions. For instance, in the Ancient Egyptian galleries associations were made between the ankh (the Ancient Egyptian symbol for life) and the Christian crucifix; the Ancient symbols of the zodiac and modern-day star signs; and the marking of anniversaries (as described on the Rosetta stone) and the celebrating of birthdays, all of which are prohibited for Witnesses. Learning more about the customs' pre-Christian origins appeared to help the attendees' justify (to themselves and to others) why they rejected such rituals. Andrew Holden (2002: 24) observed a similar entwining of the past and present in his research of the Witnesses' ministerial work:

When ministering on the doorstep, it is not unusual for Watch Tower evangelists to refer to a recent world event and use the biblical texts to explain its occurrence... It seems the more the Witnesses hear... the more their monosemic view of the world is validated.

A number of the tours I attended also discussed the biblical prophecies. The purpose of these tours were not only to show that God's prophecies were fulfilled, but that other predictions will be proved true and precise in the future. During one of the JW Tours, the guide recited one of Isaiah's prophecies, asked the group a number of rhetorical questions such as "Did it happen?" and "Are there stones that say it?", and then proceeded to take the group to an artefact that suggested that the prophecy was realised. Even the absence of supporting archaeological material was perceived as evidence, with the guide stating: "The silence confirms it never happened".<sup>134</sup> Similarly, on the Orthodox Jewish tour, the Rabbi remarked that there was no mention of the Israelites' exodus in Ancient Egyptian records because it was an embarrassment to the Egyptians. In a JW Tour, a guide read out the following command from the Old Testament, that God told the Israelites:

Their altars you should pull down, and their sacred pillars you should break down, and their sacred poles you should cut down, and their graven images you should burn with fire. For you are a holy people to Jehovah your God (Deuteronomy 7: 5-6).<sup>135</sup>

The guide then pointed to a selection of 'idols' which, he explained, showed that the idolatrous practices were not eradicated as God had asked, but continued. These idols, he stated, showed no evidence of damage, which again confirmed that the Israelites failed to follow the commandment. The guide then concluded that because of these failures, the idolatrous 'nations' went on to commit worse offences (as prophesied in the Bible).

The repeated message, that God's warnings to the ancient Israelites are still applicable to daily life, simultaneously evoked the ancient periods with a multitude of other times including present day. Serres (1995) suggestion that time percolates suitably captures the temporal nature of the tours. The guides I observed worked strategically to manage what times were evoked in order to punctuate particular lessons. The times that were not engaged with were either actively circumvented in order to avoid problems around dating or skipped because they were not relevant. Central to the guides' selection of times were the periods of the biblical accounts and the artefacts. Yet there were others, most notably the pasts, presents and futures of the attendees and key moments in the history of the museum, all of which were embroiled within the interactions. By contrast, for the museum, the Scriptures are only

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<sup>134</sup> The Creation Museum, in Kentucky, USA, uses a similar argument in respect to the lack of paleontological evidence to support the Creation, the Fall and the Flood as depicted in the Old Testament. In a diorama showing models of dinosaurs and humans together prior to the Flood, a panel asks "Are human bones found with dinosaur fossils?". Basing its interpretations on "God's word" as opposed to "Human reason", the response leaves open the possibility that such evidence could be found in the future, by suggesting that "None have been discovered yet". (The Museum is run by a Christian apologetics ministry.)

<sup>135</sup> From the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society 1981).

historical and, like other texts, sit within a specific timeframe. And so, for the museum, it is the collections that dictate what historical periods are covered.

## Voice

The guides' oral narrations played a central role in the tours I observed. As discussed, the Old Testament was frequently made present through the voice, as part of the guides' commentary, but the acts of listening and reading aloud were also equally significant. Each tour involved questioning members in order to stress particular points. Although, these interactive moments were kept to a minimum in order to privilege the guides' commentary. For both the Jewish and Jehovah's Witness tours, the guides' voices were another mediator of the Holy Scriptures, and thus the divine. However, the voice was also supported and challenged by other actors in the museum. The active social structuring of the tours, particularly around the guides' voices, sat in contrast to the more spontaneous vocal and aural experiences at the exhibitions. For example, at *Treasures* a number of religious visitors described that the overhearing of different and conflicting opinions about the exhibits impeded their ability to perform their religious practices. The tours, as will be explained, were more effective in conducting a shared religious experience as a number of measures and tools were put in place to control the aural dimensions of the group visits.

JW Tours was the only operator I observed using radio microphones, which involved each member of the tour wearing a listening device. The radio microphone and headsets helped to safeguard the tours' messages by minimising the threat of intrusive sounds such as the voices of other visitors. This was especially important as many of the galleries visited were particularly busy on a Saturday. At the exhibitions *Treasures* and *Hajj* my interviewees admitted overhearing or actively listening in to other visitors' conversations, which, on occasion, provided insights into different visitor-object experiences and interpretations. However, for the JW Tours' attendees, the opportunity or threat of hearing alternative perspectives about the visited artefacts was reduced due to the guides' deliberate management of the auditory dimensions of the gallery spaces. In my own experience as a tour attendee, it was evident that the wireless headsets provided an improved level of attentiveness, ensuring the guide's message was received clearly and, importantly, correctly.<sup>136</sup> Tours that did not use headsets, at times, struggled to maintain their groups' focus. The radio microphones supported the guides in delivering the commentaries with an air of professionalism and authority. Wearing the headsets, the group could hear the guides at all times, including one-to-one conversations as we walked between the rooms. The persistent

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<sup>136</sup> The groups that did not use headsets employed other ways to make the readings of the biblical passages distinctive (and to improve attentiveness). For example, on the tours led by Jay Smith and the GGICM the guides asked members of the group to read out the Biblical verses.

presence of the guides' voices maintained the connections between the tours, as unified groups, and the guides' positions as leaders.

For many of the Jehovah's Witnesses, the museum environment differed substantially to the more familiar and frequented meetings at, for example, Kingdom Hall where they would ordinarily, as a group, read, study and discuss the Bible and related texts. The existence of other visitors outside of their community provided a very different embodied and auditory experience. However, the presence of the guides' commentaries – that ran throughout the tours – and the Bibles in hand, maintained connections and senses of familiarity with the study sessions outside of the museum. In their study of the role of hearing in sermons, Pleizier (2010: 206) refers to 'functional listening' as a form of attentiveness where "[h]earers make use of the sermon in view of their own situation and... attempt to put the sermon into the context of their lives of faith". According to Pleizier, this 'situational-reflective' form of listening requires a "functional attitude". As discussed, attendees often came to the tours with the expectation and motivation to relate their visit to their own lives. For the Jehovah's Witness tours in particular, the guides encouraged this process of reflection, by asking for contemporary examples of pagan idols (such as horoscopes). Most of the tour members I spoke to, without prompting, related the ancient artefacts they saw to modern threats. The tours therefore functioned on both a communal and individual level. They also operated to reaffirm previously learnt teachings, as opposed to learning something new.

Discussing the presence of the Bible/Tanach tour groups with the front-of-house staff, most expressed a curiosity around the tours' approaches and agendas. Yet a few staff members also exhibited uneasiness about the guides' commentaries. Their concern mostly regarded not what the guides said, but rather how other visitors (within and outside the groups) interpreted them. Central to their apprehension was the fact that the visitors would overhear the guides and assume that they spoke for the museum. One visitor services assistant (VSA) recalled:

In Room 69 ['Greek and Roman life'] they've got a big bit about Roman gods and goddesses. They always come up and they're like, 'Oh yes, this religion is wrong'. It gets a bit awkward sometimes because you get visitors overhearing them and they react towards that.

The VSA stated that, on a couple of occasions, other visitors listening in would look to her, as a staff member in uniform, with bewildered expressions. "But you can't really do anything because they're allowed to say whatever they want", she stated. These concerns return again to the issue of managing the space and reducing threats, even if that threat refers to an ambiguity around whose opinion, the museum or the individual, is being publically voiced. By accommodating (or, at least, not preventing) the presence of such tour groups within the public galleries, the museum is demonstrating how it is inclusive to different forms of visitor engagement. Yet this desire for inclusivity may be in tension with aspirations for a form of education which adheres to a particular 'version' of history and truth that is inherently secular in nature. The VSA's response also illustrates an example where the explicit presence of religious activities may lead some visitors to feel uncomfortable. This was also evident in the exhibitions, for example, when a visitor to *Hajj* said that he no longer felt "at home" in the

British Museum after witnessing how engaged and affected the Muslim visitors were with the displays. These feelings of discomfort, again, pertain to the expectation that museums are places of secular education. For visitors and staff members who subscribe to this view, such forms of religious practice (whether devotional or instructive) are therefore conceived as being out of place and at odds with the institution's purpose.

## **Authenticity**

From my observations, it was apparent that the tours led by Jehovah's Witness and Evangelical guides made a clear divide between the information obtained from the biblical accounts and the content presented by the museum. The founder of JW Tours summarised this stance by stating that "archaeology is not the basis to have faith because archaeology is subject to interpretation". The process of marking such distinctions involved an array of material and immaterial actors. For the Christian groups the Bible and archaeology were read very differently. For the Witnesses, it was imperative that particular events in the Bible were not questioned or rejected in light of 'external' information. Thus, the objects were transformed into 'supporting' or 'secondary' evidence, as most of the groups (members and leaders) stated that the Bible alone can verify its truth claims. Hence, artefacts which can corroborate the biblical evidence were greeted with enthusiasm, but (in theory) had no bearing on the groups' understanding of the Bible. Any discussions over the interpretation of the Scriptures which took place, usually concerned the translation, which is considered an 'earthly' task and therefore prone to error. For example, in the tour led by the Orthodox Rabbi, one of the attendees, an Orthodox Jewish woman from New York, inspected my copy of the Tanach (issued from a reform synagogue) and questioned if it was "a real one" in regard to the accuracy of the translation. The authenticity of the Scriptures as well as the related 'external' information therefore played a crucial role across the tours.

Latour (1987: 104) in his writings on the production of scientific 'truth claims', stated that the "construction of facts.... [is] a collective process" that involves heterogeneous networks of human and non-human actors, including texts, objects, statistics, data from experiments, and so on. During the tour, the guides employed a variety of methods to substantiate and strengthen their claims concerning the historical accuracy of the Bible, using both human and non-human actors. The more connections and actors there were, the stronger the claims appeared to be. For example, a number of guides emphasised the accumulation of evidence in order to demonstrate the veracity of the Bible. This involved linking the Scriptures to different artefacts, but also stating the number of times different books within the Old Testament mentioned the same place, name or event. For example, on Jay Smith's tour, he explained that, in regard to the Israelite King Jehu, there were already two mentions of this name in 1st Kings (Ch 22) and 2nd Kings (Ch 9/10), and then asked, "Do you want a third corroboration?", before taking the group to an artefact that also mentioned Jehu by name (Fillymonn 2008). And so, the Bible was not perceived as one source, but as a collection of multiple books from

multiple eyewitnesses. These multiple references could therefore validate each other and so, accumulatively, add to the Bible's reliability. This strength in numbers also applied to the non-biblical sources in terms of showing several mentions of the same name or event in archaeological finds or by naming different academics who support the Bible. For example, during his tour, Jay Smith read out a succession of quotes from historians that endorsed the historical accuracy of the Bible which, the guide affirmed, "gives us an awful lot of confidence". This combining of (selected) non-biblical and biblical sources provided additional authority to these claims. However, it should be noted that not all the tours read the Holy Scriptures as a literal account of historical events, but instead provide a more critical study of the text in light of other historical finds. The rational critique approach was taken up by Rabbi Michael, while still recognising the Old Testament as a sacred and thus divinely connected text.

The matter of quantity also arose in the engagements with the artefacts, in particular, around the issue of idolatry. In contrast to the negative experiences of plenitude encountered at *Treasures* (which one visitor described as an "embarrassment of riches"), the plenitude of idolatrous objects on the tours effectively demonstrated a crucial lesson within the Jewish and Jehovah's Witnesses' belief systems. The experience of encountering large assemblages of artefacts, whether it was all at once or accumulatively over the course of the tour, enabled the guides to underscore the profusion of idols in the periods covered by the Bible. On one of the JW Tours, a guide pointed out the ankh (☩) and remarked upon its resemblance to the gender symbols used today. The guide then proceeded to turn to Deuteronomy and the command that no man should make "any symbol [in] the representation of male or female" (4: 16). The gender or fertility association to the ankh is highly debated, but in the context of the tour, with the verse read out before the statue, the link was made explicit. On passing other cases of Egyptian artefacts, the guide pointed out more ankhs from different regions and centuries. The spectacle of seeing multiple idolatrous artefacts underscored their abundance in Ancient Egypt and, importantly, the ancient Egyptians continued defiance of God. Similar associations were also made between the iconography of Ancient Egypt and Assyria and contemporary horoscopes and the crucifix, all of which are strongly rejected by the Witnesses. By interacting with the 'idols', whilst reading passages that rejected idolatry, God's instruction was underscored.

By way of contrast to the observed Christian and Jewish tours, in June 2012 I attended a British Museum-organised gallery talk entitled 'The Old Testament' led by Emma, an independent expert in Assyrian history.<sup>137</sup> Although the talk encompassed many of the same

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<sup>137</sup> The Rabbi guides I spoke to also stated that they did not read the Old Testament as a historical document, although, on a number of occasions, it was evident that they believed that many of the recorded events took place (such as the Exodus).

galleries as the Bible tours, Emma's commentary did not set out to prove a literal reading of the biblical accounts, but to question, challenge and identify where records from different civilisations intersected with the events in the Old Testament. At the beginning of the talk, she explained that the tour's aim was not "to prove or disprove the Bible, but to look at both accounts objectively and see what help they can be to scholars", and added that both "Old Testament and the Assyrian annals are written with a bias". On a number of occasions during the tour, Emma explained where the Old Testament and Assyrian records contradicted one another or where events in one record were not supported. For example, like many of the Bible tours, Emma stopped at one of the Assyrian stelas and pointed to the depiction of Ahab, an Israelite king mentioned in the Bible. Here she explained that this was the "first time a biblical king appears in the records of another state so here we have a cross-reference and Ahab can be claimed to be historical in a way King David and King Solomon cannot". For Emma, the combining of the biblical account with a non-biblical Assyrian record, provided the evidence to place Ahab within a specific timeframe. However, unlike many of the Christian tours, Emma was keen to point out that the corroboration of a particular name and event did not imply that the whole of the Old Testament should be read as a literal text, as many other biblical accounts are not supported by other records and therefore cannot make the same historical claims.<sup>138</sup>

During Emma's 'Old Testament' talk, she also questioned the biblical passage, which stated that an angel killed 185,000 Assyrians.<sup>139</sup> In an attempt to find a rational and demystified explanation, Emma stated that the mass death was more likely to be the result of "dysentery than an angel". She also explained that Babylonians often understood sudden illness as divine punishment, which may account for why the Bible records this event as a direct act of God. By contrast, on one of the Witnesses' tours, the guide asserted that the Assyrian records do not mention the deaths because the "angel killed them all". Another guide stated that the Assyrians only recorded victories and so the defeat was censored. The evangelist guide Jay Smith also used the angel to explain why the Bible's account of the event is often rejected:

As a historian you're not going to accept anything except what you read here [in the museum]. And you're not going to come back to the Bible, because if you come back to the Bible, which tells you the rest of the story and tells you what actually went on, you're going to have to accept... that there's a God (Fillymonn 2008).

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<sup>138</sup> Emma stated that neither King David nor King Solomon are mentioned in sources besides the Old Testament.

<sup>139</sup> This event, in 2nd Kings (19: 35), reads "an angel of the Lord went out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp, and the following morning they were all dead corpses". Emma did not read this passage, but paraphrased.

For Smith and many of the Jehovah's Witness guides, the angel was a critical element within the events in Assyria. And so, unlike Emma, they did not attempt to re-interpret the angel as a natural (non-divine) phenomenon and therefore dismiss the miraculous and supernatural elements of the biblical account. To do so would question the accuracy of the Bible.<sup>140</sup>

Following Emma's talk, I spoke to one of the attendees who told me that she had converted to Christianity later in life and had, subsequently, "thoroughly" read the Bible. Discussing the tour, she expressed her disappointment about the way Emma presented the Assyrian records. "I didn't trust it", she exclaimed, adding that the Assyrian annals were "just boasting" whereas the biblical accounts presented a "more objective" view of the events. Like Angela who attended the British Museum's family workshop on Buddhism, the attendee was confronted with interpretations that conflicted with her religious beliefs. The attendee also asked why Emma only gave one biblical reference about an Assyrian event, when two different books within the Old Testament mention it. Emma's assertion that all records from this period were written from a bias was highly problematic for this visitor who saw the Bible as the only authentic recording of events.

In contrast to the tours, authenticity played a smaller role in many of the sacred entanglements studied at the special exhibitions. For example, at *Treasures*, none of my Catholic and Orthodox interviewees mentioned wanting or needing to prove the relics' authenticity by way of 'secular' records or scientific tests. The Catholic and Orthodox visitors either explicitly stated that they believed that the corporeal relics in the exhibition were genuine or the issue of authenticity was not raised. And, unlike the Bible tours, the visitors to *Treasures* did not have to challenge and dispute the museum's dating, because the corporeal fragments were not dated. The notion of authenticity and the process of authentication, within relic and icon veneration, are also understood differently to the 'evidence' provided through scientific testing due to the miraculous nature of the objects and their associated powers. For example, one visitor at *Treasures* told me:

I haven't attached so much enquiry, personally, to their authenticity because of my view that the relics or the icons themselves purport to work wonders, but they are essentially a pointer to the creator.... If we focus a lot on authenticity then they begin to, in themselves, have material value and that distracts from its essence.

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<sup>140</sup> During the Orthodox Rabbi's trip to the archives, he showed the group an Egyptian bronze staff in the shape of a snake with an undulating tail. Twirling the staff in a circular motion, the Rabbi demonstrated how the staff gave the "impression of a living thing" and could, therefore, appear to be writhing like a snake (as depicted in Exodus 7: 10). By showcasing the staff, the Rabbi was able to demystify the miraculous element of the story and therefore add a sense of plausibility to the event. Yet by doing so this alternative reading refuted the staff-transforming account as described in Exodus.

Thus, even the activity of questioning the relics' material qualities was deemed as out of keeping with the practice of veneration. For the few (religious) visitors who expressed doubt over the credibility of the relics, they still harboured holy powers as a result of their participation in centuries of devotion. The visitors' ability to accept an absence of evidence, and the museum's lack of dating, enabled the question of authenticity to remain peripheral.<sup>141</sup> At *Hajj*, the interpretation, again, provided few points of conflict for the Muslim visitor (as the labels and panels neither questioned nor challenged the religious beliefs and rituals), and so, there was little need for the Muslim visitors to actively counter the museum's approach.

## Contaminants and threats

The presence of certain displayed objects in the museum posed a number of issues for some of the tour groups in regard to their status as idols and, in the case of human remains, the presence of impurities. Whilst the objects' connections to the Old Testament were the reason the Jewish and Christian groups came to the museum, the religious texts (and continuing interpretations) also raised a number of issues about how one should interact with these problematic actors.

On the website for the Orthodox Rabbi's British Museum tours, he stipulates that visitors on his tour should not bend down to read labels at the base of objects, and instead bend sideways. I asked the Rabbi what he meant by this. He responded:

In Jewish teaching, even the mere bending in front of an idol... is an act of idolatry. People don't think about that because today we don't have idolatry on our minds... Bowing down is an act of idolatry and I can't have them do that because it makes me responsible. So I have to warn them.

For the Rabbi, the physical act of bending forward, regardless of whether the individual intended to genuflect, constituted idolatrous behaviour. While the act of bending to read an object label may seem an innocent gesture, the Rabbi's warning to the group raised their awareness of the threat of idolatry and the ('misdirected') power these objects were believed to possess. The prohibition on idolatry, which relates to the third commandment within Exodus (20: 4-6), is an incredibly strong principle within Judaism and so even a suggestion of it (whether physical or mental) would be considered misconduct. The fear that the act may be perceived by others (including God) as idolatrous led the Orthodox Jewish guide to actively prohibit certain postures, and thus stress the (still) present danger of idol worship. The Rabbi also explained that the instruction made the attendees "aware that idolatry is a real thing and

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<sup>141</sup> However, the matter of authenticity was often raised during the curators' public talks. These questions concerned why the Museum had not tested the relics.

certainly was once a very real thing in people’s lives”. In this sense, the guide was constructing the tour as a religious performance of drawing boundaries between what practices are and are not acceptable within a public space.

There is also the issue of how one should look at an idol, if at all. On Rabbi Kaganoff’s website (2011) he responds to a number of questions about idols in museums. In doing so, he cites the 17<sup>th</sup> century Rabbi and Talmudist Avraham Gombiner (also known as Magen Avraham) who stated that the Talmud forbids intentionally gazing at an idol, but does not prohibit glancing at it. Kaganoff also references another Poskim (religious decider) who stated that “if no one worships these icons anymore anywhere in the world, one need not be concerned about suspicion that they are being worshipped”. This suggests that Ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian statues no longer pose threats. The Orthodox Rabbi I met at the British Museum echoed this understanding, stating that the idol in the museum is “dead because it doesn’t exist anymore... because that culture no longer exists”. Although, the fact that the guide prohibits bending before the statues suggests that they still have the power to be construed as idols.



Figure 26: Body of a Late-Predynastic Egyptian man (Berns 2011e)

During the Orthodox Rabbi’s tour, we looked at the dead body of an Egyptian man (see Figure 26) that presented a possible pollutant. After viewing the exhibit, one of the Jewish women on the tour asked the Rabbi if she had to go and wash her hands. After the tour she explained:

If you go to a funeral and there's a dead body, then afterwards you have to do a ritual wash... You pour the water over your hands three times... He said I don't have to [this time] but usually you do.

Interested by the tour member's question and the Rabbi's response, I asked another Jewish tour leader, what was meant by this. She explained that Jews who are believed to be of priestly descent (Cohanim) cannot be in the presence of dead people and it is likely that the woman on the tour came from this bloodline. However, the Rabbi most probably dismissed her concern for one of two reasons. First, the rule around contact with the dead only applies to Jewish dead bodies and the label for this case stated that he was Egyptian. Second, the body is "totally encased... [and] atmospherically sealed... You are not standing in the same room... you are not even breathing the same air". As the case was understood to be hermitically sealed, there was no issue of contamination. The contaminating aura of the dead body was thus another actor bound within the network, which was mediated and transformed by other actors present in the space. In contrast to the acts of veneration discussed previously, which saw the glass case as a channel which allowed the sacred power of the relics to flow, the hermitically sealed case acted as a barrier to contain the pollutant. Mary Douglas (2002) talks about "pollutants" in terms of pollution beliefs. In the scenario described, not only is there the shared belief regarding the pollutant, but also the shared belief that the glass cases can contain it. Belief and understanding around how particular materials act are therefore collaborative processes between the physical properties of the material objects, the visitor and the visitor's religious community (which include the Rabbi).<sup>142</sup>

On the Rabbi's website the FAQ page stated that the museum tour was not recommended for Cohanim as human remains are on site.<sup>143</sup> The Cohanim (or Kohanim) are believed to be the patrilineal descendants of Aaron, the brother of Moses and are therefore considered to be Jews of priestly descent (Berlin 2011). This belief, along with the rules around how a Cohen (or Kohen) should behave around a dead body are grounded in the following biblical passage in Leviticus (21: 1): "And the Lord said unto Moses, Speak unto the priests the sons of Aaron, and say unto them, There shall none be defiled for the dead among his people." The majority of what is written about the impurities of dead bodies within Jewish religious law concern funerary practices and so, in respect to dead bodies in museums, there is a measure of ambiguity about how to interpret these regulations in other contexts. For this reason, a number of websites provide guidelines on where a Cohen can visit. For example, the Chicago Rabbinical Council provides an online "Kohain's Guide" to the local museums, stating what

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<sup>142</sup> Another contaminant was encountered at the V&A, London when conservators were working on a Torah scroll. During the process, the V&A consulted a curator from a Jewish Heritage institution about the use of the consolidate 'isinglass', which derives from the sturgeon fish. Due to an uncertainty concerning whether 'isinglass' was kosher, a different consolidate was used (Bancroft 2012).

<sup>143</sup> To preserve the anonymity of my informant, the web address is not provided.

museums Cohanim are “permitted” to access and where access is “problematic”. Problematic items that may lead to prohibition include “human remains in storage” and Egyptian mummies, as well as reliquaries that contain bone fragments (Chicago Rabbinical Council 2012). However, how the impurity is spatially understood varies. For Jewish cemeteries, there are (contested) stipulations about how close a Cohen can stand to the grave. Often, this distance is reduced when a material boundary, such as a fence, separates the Cohen from the burial plot. And yet, how far this impurity can spread is highly debated within and between the different Jewish sects. The notion of being in the same space as a dead body, is called ‘tumat ohel’, with ‘tumat’ meaning impure and ‘ohel’ meaning tent, but is now often understood to mean ‘under the same roof’ (Klein 1979). In the context of the museum, there is disagreement about both of these terms; firstly, in regard to whether a non-Jewish body is an impurity (as, stated earlier, the restrictions around corpses is understood to concern only Jewish bodies) and secondly, in terms of what constitutes the ‘same roof’.

Examples of the debate around how the term ‘ohel’ is understood are illustrated on a number of online discussion boards. In one such discussion entitled ‘Museums and Kohanim’, an online user (Imamother 2013) wrote:

[The] Museum of Natural History or British Museums [sic] are pretty large, and have enough sections a kohen can go through without being exposed to human remains. I thought the restriction was to be in actually the same room, as opposed to the building (which consists of different wings or many self-contained exhibition areas)?

However, what constitutes as a wing is also debated, as are the boundaries of a building (if, for instance, multiple buildings are connected by doors). In other words, is the whole building ‘the same roof’ or could it be a smaller space within the building, such as a gallery or a glass display case? If the term ‘ohel’ is considered to be the latter, then the Cohen (standing on the opposite side of the glass) is not in the same space as the dead body and therefore not in contact with the impurity. This interpretation relies upon the presence of the glass barrier and a specific distance between the body and the case. For example, on a discussion board at theyeshivaworld.com, a user wrote: “if the remains are in a glass box with space of at least a tefach [handbreadth] (aprx. 4”) between the body parts and the top cover then it’s considered a separate ohel and should not be a problem” (The Yeshiva World News 2011). Many of these forum users cite various religious texts and the opinions of Poskim (scholars who determine decisions on religious laws) to support their views, but also to raise concerns and doubts. And so, whilst the Rabbi guide on the tour I observed assured the Jewish attendee that she did not need to perform a ritual wash, his website FAQ page advises Cohanim to discuss their possible attendance with their own Rabbi. This, again, suggests an uncertainty and a lack of definitive ruling about the issue of exposure. Thus, how visitors consider and behave around the encased human remains is not only determined by the presence of the dead bodies (and the glass display cases) but also by people and texts of religious authority both outside and inside

the museum. Furthermore, these same networks of actors deter people from visiting altogether, which demonstrate the power of these religious texts and artefacts when bound up within the same networks.

## Conclusion

On the tours, the performative role of the Bible operated on multiple levels, whether read silently, out loud or simply held. Its presence, as material and/or oral agents, acted as a social bond, a mark of identity, a framework for understanding the objects, as well as a link to the divine. A hierarchy was evident, with the Bible functioning as the primary historical source with the museum labels, panels and objects as secondary. While the museum treats the Bible as they would any other ancient text, the tour guides and attendees expressed an uncertainty, and sometimes plain distrust, of other sources of information. These 'secular' sources included records from the ancient period (referred to by one guide as 'propaganda'<sup>144</sup>) as well as contemporary interpretations, which for some religious visitors actively denied the Bible of any credibility. The suspicion surrounding non-biblical sources underlined the different agendas of the tours and the museum. The tours prioritising of the Bible, over other exhibits, appeared at times to embody a form of secular/religious division and yet in practice muddled the two completely.

In comparison to the exhibitions *Hajj* and *Treasures*, where visitors were very conscious of being in a pluralist space (as other visitors' religious and nonreligious beliefs, practices and affiliations could not be assumed), the Bible tours sought to create a shared set of religious sensibilities and assumptions. The tours created a shared religious experience that, like a bubble, protected the participants from nonreligious distractions. This was made possible through such tools as the headsets (which reduced external noises) and the guides' scripts and routes through the galleries that missed out many of the exhibits and texts. The tours, therefore, seemed to demonstrate that the gallery space cannot determine whether or not it becomes a site of religious experience as it is possible for groups to assemble the tools, artefacts and texts to create a tour that centres on the divine. It also suggests that the Bible tours are far more successful at creating a shared religious experience than the exhibition staff are at evoking devotional experiences. Key to this success is the pre-existing shared beliefs of the participants, but also the filtering out of contradictory or conflicting (or unchallenged) information. And so, the ways in which the tours were structured enabled the guides to control the meaning and experience of the museum visit, which would leave few opportunities for visitors to experience and express alternative interpretations.

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<sup>144</sup> A number of visitors on the Jewish and Witnesses tours also described some of the non-Biblical accounts as 'propaganda', but only when the accounts did not support the events in the Bible.

In terms of the visitors' relationship to the divine, for the (majority of the) tour members, the artefacts did not mediate a direct divine presence nor did their inclusion within biblical narratives sanctify the objects. Rather, the encountered artefacts reflected attention back to the Bible (as the Word of God) in order to validate the Scriptures' teachings and prophecies. However, the artefacts were able to present threats in the form of idols or pollutants, which underscored the ongoing danger of certain objects. In sum, the tour guides and members came to the tour with the shared understanding that the divinely-inspired Scripture is the only legitimate mediator to God. The tours, accordingly, worked to reaffirm this sacred connection and, thereby, discredit other forms of worship.

## chapter eight: CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, I reflect on the different ways sacred encounters in the museum were evoked, prevented and negotiated in order to understand how visitors and museum objects operate within religious practices. By employing ANT as a lens to approach museum visitor interactions, I was made more conscious of how networks were formed and what human and non-human actors were involved (including those that are masked through processes of purification). Moreover, ANT provided the tools to “articulate silent layers, turn questions upside down, focus on the unexpected, add to one’s sensitivities, propose new terms, and shift stories from one context to another” (Mol 2010: 262). Through applying ANT and theoretical approaches from material religion, this research challenged the centrality of the human participants within engagements involving objects, museum visitors and divine/spiritual beings.

I begin this final chapter by arguing that although people’s dispositions play a crucial role in museum visitor experiences, non-human actors (such as divine presences, displayed objects and brought-in possessions) also significantly shape their encounters. The chapter then goes on to consider more specifically the role of non-humans which reduce the agency of the visitors and museum staff. As a result, the human/non-human hybrid actions are far less predictable and controllable (as they could work against the intentions of the visitor, institution or authorised religious practice). Examining the museum networks, I discuss how particular constellations make certain engagements more or less likely. Thus, a constellation of actors may favour a particular response, but there is no guarantee visitors will respond accordingly as actors are highly contingent and variable. These findings, therefore, challenge the use of evaluation models that attempt to predict responses. I then revisit the religious/secular binary. In the first part of this thesis I explained how the religious/secular binary obscured and oversimplified the nature of lived practices within the academic study of religion. Because of this, I rejected using these terms as analytical categories. However, in the interactions observed, the religious/secular categories were especially potent in shaping norms and protocols within the museum. They also (partially) determined whether the museum became a site of conflict or opportunity for particular practices and convictions. Yet, as the meanings of these categories are not stable, they do not work in predictable ways. I then look at how sacred connections were evoked or prevented, paying particular attention to the challenges that sacred engagements faced in the museum. Finally I conclude by assessing how this work might connect to places and practices outside of the museum context.

This research began with the aim of determining the ways in which exhibits played an active role in visitors' religious experiences within museums. The heterogeneous nature of visitor engagements required a holistic approach to bring the disparate elements of the museum visit together. Through disentangling such visitor-exhibit encounters, the project revealed how different assemblages of actors may heighten the possibility of certain sacred experiences taking place, whereas other assemblages may hinder and prevent such eventualities. Through observing visitor-exhibit interactions, I gradually built a picture of the many actors that constituted museum-based engagements. In time my focus widened beyond the exhibit in order to account for a much larger array of actors. These included the mundane facets of the exhibition, actors that were materially absent, as well as entities that were conceived as divine or supernatural. In order to consider how visitors experience divine or supernatural presences within the museum, I explored the social, emotional, material and embodied ways in which visitors interacted with 'things'. This approach, therefore, looked to studies around religious practice and lived experience, in order to comprehend the ways in which different immaterial and material elements form a religious performance (McGuire 2008, Woodhead 2012, and Bender 2011). Investigating the role things play in people's religious lives (and not just the authorised and institutional modes of religion), provided opportunities to explore the impact of mundane actors and events (from the presence of benches to the procedure of having to purchase timed exhibition tickets). These actors and activities made visible particular moments of cooperation, influence, conflict, indifference and rejection.

In order to disentangle the interactions and negotiations that were performed in the museum, I adopted an actor-network approach as a way to describe how different immaterial and material entities impacted upon one another. Stolow (2007: 315), in his examination of Jewish publishing, described the interplay of actors in regard to Hebrew texts:

it is only through the networked, recursive processes of co-mingling of humans, texts, and their material conditions of exchange that texts can be said to have a social life. This is not to diminish the importance of human agency in the production, consumption, and routine use of books (or any other artefact, for that matter). It is simply an acknowledgment that the terms "agency" and "action" refer to a broad range of transformative relationships, technologies, artefacts, and events.

Humans are, therefore, one of many entities within an event which have the potential to act, but only when the action is distributed amongst other non-human actors. This understanding of non-human actors challenges the Protestant/secular perception that only humans possess agency (Keane 2007). Such views obscured and ignored the significant roles non-human entities play. This research, thereby, employed an approach that could account for the agency of things and of divine and supernatural actors. By doing so I was able to devise an understanding of the sacred that employed the language of mediation (Meyer 2009). In this study, I therefore described encounters with the divine and supernatural as mediated through different

assemblages of immaterial and material actors and practices. Thus, it is not the actors that are sacred, but the particular quality of interaction that brings them together. Furthermore, these encounters are dependent on a large variety of factors within the moment of the interaction that affect the quality and efficacy of the engagement. This research also sought to discover why religion and materiality featured so little in visitor evaluations. As previously stated, the British Museum was informed by the ideologies of Protestantism. These Christian values are embedded in the museum's founding collection, as the combined manifestation of Hans Sloane's scientific and religious beliefs. The perception that both the Enlightenment and British museums are secular masks these Protestant influences which were very much bound up with liberal rationalism. And so, in museums today we are presented with religion in a setting that is often considered a devotion-free space. This perception persists due to the process of purification, which sought to dematerialise religion by legitimising belief-centred religious practices over what was viewed as materially-dependent acts of devotion. As a result, this purified understanding of museums presents two different perceptions of religion. On the one hand, we have the objects that (re-)present material forms of religion as part of distant and historic rituals, and on the other hand, we have the non-material forms of religion practised by the visitor, albeit in places other than the museum. Yet, as this study illustrated, these two forms of religion are not distinct categories, but are frequently entwined within visitor-object interactions.

Over the past twenty years, the field of material religion has shifted attention from a semiotic and art-historical approach to the significance of objects in religious practice. As such, the study of material religion can be understood as part of a wider turn to the study of lived religion. This shift directed the focus away from elitist, doctrinal or abstracted forms of religion, to the ways people conduct their religious lives across a range of social settings that extend beyond traditional religious institutions and spaces. The wider literature on material religion provides useful conceptual tools for this study, such as the role of mediation through material forms and media. However, little attention, within this field, is paid to empirical research into people's sacred entanglements with religious objects in pluralist, public cultural spaces such as museums. Similar omissions are evident in museum visitor studies where there is a significant lack of empirical studies into devotional practices. This research, therefore, addresses an important gap within two fields of study.

### **The role of the human actors**

The outcomes of purification arise in a number of forms within museum visitor studies. One of the most significant examples, highlighted in this work, is the privileging of the human experience over non-human actors. This imbalance saw the visitor privileged as the nucleus of action, of intention and meaning. This prioritising of the visitor was viewed as a shift within visitor studies to empower the visitor, pushing the focus away from the institution. However, this shift perpetuated the perception that humans (be they the museum staff or visitors) were

the only actors that could influence and shape an interaction.<sup>145</sup> The agency of other non-human entities were consequently ignored, denied or simply assigned to humans. On the subject of the privileging of particular actors, Mol (2010: 255-6) wrote:

It is striking that some actors receive a great deal of credit: they are celebrated as heroes. But it may well be that they only seem so strong because the activity of lots of others is attributed to them.

Over the past three decades, a number of key contributors to museum visitor studies have argued that the visitors' pre-existing sensibilities not only shape the visitors' museum visits, but do so more than any other factor (see Scriven 1991, Falk 1992, and Doering and Pekarik 1996). Many of these scholars and evaluators have focused on visitors' past experiences, motivations, interests and values. But these studies rarely acknowledged the role material 'things' played in their museum visit experiences. In many ways, the visitors' encounters with non-human material actors will be determined by their pre-existing experiences and sensitivities (which will be discussed in more detail). For example, at *Treasures*, a number of visitors' past and present practices with relics at pilgrimage sites influenced how they encountered the relics in the museum. Yet, it was not only the visitors' memories that determined the nature of their museum engagement, but the materiality of the relics at the pilgrimage sites, the materiality of the relics at the museum and possibly similar objects encountered elsewhere, whether in person or via another media. The way the museum and pilgrimage site relics differed, how they were displayed and the ways they could be physically interacted with, again, shaped that museum engagement. As the previously encountered artefacts pre-existed these museum visitor-object interactions, we must acknowledge the artefacts' role in co-determining visitors' past, present and future experiences. Yet, as illustrated, there are also other factors within the museum that influence the visit and the relic interaction, such as the gallery's noise-levels and the availability of seating. These elements are not pre-determined by the visitors' past experiences, some are not even (wholly) determined by the museum. Rather, a whole host of variables shape individual visits on the day.

The museum curators and designers also have an impact on the ways the artefacts are displayed and interpreted, but these decisions compete with a whole host of other factors. This was especially evident on the Bible tours when, instead of looking at the labels and displays, the attendees' attention was instead focused on the Bible. Also, at *Hajj*, some of the audio features at the entrance to the exhibition could not be heard by visitors using the multimedia guide. When such elements are not noticed, they essentially do not exist. Similarly, staff decisions may

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<sup>145</sup> For example, Allen (2002: 299), in her study of science exhibitions using conversation analysis, noted that visitors' "power of choice" was one of her most striking discoveries. She stated "visitors are choosing where to spend every second of their time, and exhibits that do not engage or sustain them are quickly left behind".

not always operate as they were intended. Again, at *Hajj*, the subdued lighting was used to instil a particularly reverent atmosphere. However, for visitors who had performed the pilgrimage to Mecca, the exhibition was far too dark and, thus, failed to represent the brightness of the Saudi Arabian cities. The lighting was therefore interpreted as being a trait that was typical of a museum's perception of something religious, which undermined the designers' intentions in trying to evoke the Islamic pilgrimage destination. The museum visit is composed of many different factors that cannot simply be attributed to the intentions of the museum staff and the visitors' motivations and sensibilities. The non-human entities, in collaboration with the human actors, are active in shaping the visitors' experiences and producing a variety of interactions that are unique to the museum environment.

The purification process is also evident in the field of museum visitor evaluation reports, which have again failed to focus on visitors' experiences of sacred entanglements. The omission of such experiences lies in part with the core agendas of public museums, which are often set by the terms of their funding and wider policy requirements. These, in turn, determine the criteria that assesses and measures visitor engagements. The demand for museums to demonstrate their impact and value has led many institutions to adopt evaluation methods that are objective-focused and outcome-based. Pekarik (2010:108), alluded to this process when he described objective- and outcome-based evaluations as "an arrangement of funnels" that strain away any "unruly" behaviours that do not fit the criteria. Even when studies adopt more open-ended approaches to understanding visitors, they generally conceive visitor experiences as individualised and centred on meaning-making. For many museums it is the learning outcomes that establish the framework and form that the evaluations take and thus determine what results and conclusions they make. In order to account for a wider range of experiences, often missed by other methods, this research uses an approach that avoids guiding the results to particular outcomes. ANT, as Mol argues (2010: 255) only observes effects "[n]ot goals, not ends, but all kinds of effects, surprising ones included".

The centrality of the individualised experience in visitor evaluation was evident in MHM's use of the term 'spiritual' in their visitor reports (for the British Museum). The term, according to MHM's definitions, describes an individualised experience that regards self-improvement, fulfilment or renewal as the ideal outcome of the museum visit. But this understanding of 'spiritual' failed to encapsulate the sacred encounters at *Treasures* or *Hajj*. Therefore, without the necessary segment category or criteria to recognise encounters that evoke or relate to the supernatural or divine, the sacred encounters become obscured and misread. The criteria affiliated to MHM's 'spiritual' category were more applicable to the visitor experiences reported at the Grayson Perry exhibition as multiple visitors described their visit as 'creative', 'inspiring' and 'reflective', with few visitors reporting any interactions that evoked the supernatural or divine. This suggests that MHM's evaluations endorse the view that museums sacralise art and knowledge. MHM's 'spiritual' category, within their Hierarchy of Visitor Engagement model, therefore fails to account for religious practices as it prioritises a nonreligious type of sacred.

The process of decentring the visitor provided a number of challenges. When writing up my findings, I found that the visitor constantly asserted him and herself as the source of action. It seemed that the nature of academic writing privileged the human actor. Perhaps this was felt particularly acutely because this study shared many traits with visitor analyses, which seldom recognised the agency of non-human entities. The project, therefore, raised questions in regard to how I should write about human and non-human agency in ways that gave proper weight to both. To address this issue, on some occasions I traced the action starting with the visitor, and on other occasions I began with the non-human actor. This resulted in a web of connections that frequently crossed paths and shared actors, and illustrated how every actor (whether human or non-human) emerged through the actions of others. For example, to an observer it may seem that the Bible tour guides were the actors that possessed and exerted the most power within the tour-networks. In fact, the non-human actors were integral to every action. Without the artefacts, where in the museum would the guides lead the groups? Without the Bible text how would they select the artefacts? Without the museum where would this all take place? The interactions studied were collaborative processes, combining humans, texts, objects, concepts and the divine. While human intentions play a prominent role in their museum experiences, some things are not experienced out of choice. A visitor may choose to read a label, but they do not choose for that label to be there and for it to be written in that way. There is a precarious, unpredictable quality to the museum visit. My findings therefore challenge the notion that visitors demonstrate freewill, as every action performed by the visitor is partly-enabled and partly-constrained by the material environment.

Each actor – as part of a collective – directed, constructed and constricted the interactions that took place. It was therefore essential to describe the ways in which these actors were entwined, but also to maintain the actors' autonomy in order to observe the ways the elements were active within different assemblages. Latour (1999b: 138) explained that employing metaphors that evoked paths and trails kept the “positive aspect of the intermediary transformations without touching the autonomy of the object”. To say “paves the way”, Latour proposed, does “not imply any negation of the existence of that which is eventually reached”. All the actors that are implicated in a particular act are transformative and, thereby, traceable.

### **The agency of non-human actors**

The ANT approach allowed me to attend to the specific ways different material forms operated within visitor-object interactions. As stated earlier, museum visitor studies literature places great emphasis on the knowledge, interests and motivations that visitors bring to their visit, but very rarely do studies attend to the material things that visitors carry with them. Should the visitor bring something with them, it will be determined in part by all of these immaterial factors. For example, visitors who had experience of veneration and pilgrimage were more likely to bring objects to bless. These personal objects had to contend with material things within the museum environment, from the glass cases, to the ‘do not touch’ signs. This process, therefore,

involved negotiation, adaptation and, often, compromise. The brought objects also impacted upon other visitors as visible indicators of religious practice. In turn, those visitors who brought objects were often aware of the visibility of the act and so, at times, modified their performance. Thus, when we consider the materiality of a visit, we must also consider the protocols that exist around the personal objects that visitors bring in and the displayed objects that they encounter. Again, there may be particular points of contention but also opportunities for positive experiences. The personal Bibles brought on the Bible tours, for example, provided a way to unite the tour attendees (through synchronised readings) but also communicate the nature of their visit to others. What is clear is that museums are different to recognised sites of devotion and so when a visitor brings in an object, the way the object interacts with all the elements within the gallery is different to how it would act elsewhere. Modification is required and if this is not possible, the religious performance may fail. In his discussions on ANT, Graham Harman (2007) describes the transformations actors undergo by using the analogy of baking. A cake, he stated, is more than a collection of ingredients. It is a sequence of transformative events that occur due to the combination of ingredients and a succession of chemical reactions. Within the context of this research, Bible tours were not simply groups of people, Bibles, and a collection of artefacts and labels. The coming together of these actors created a unique assemblage shaped by the museum environment. The efficacy of religious practices in the museum therefore depends upon a combination that mixes the visitors' beliefs, practices, and objects along with the museum's collections, interpretations and identity.

Examining how brought-in-objects interact with other elements in museums, also helps to reveal the ways in which the museum institution contends with religious practices. For instance, a British Museum Visitor Services Assistant told me that a visitor had left some flowers at the statue of Ganesha in the permanent galleries. However, the offering (as evidence of a visitor's devotional practice) was considered litter and so could not remain. Religious dress also had an impact. At both *Treasures* and *Hajj*, a number of visitors perceived the presence of people in religious dress (from clerical collars worn by priests to the hijabs worn by Muslim women) as a sign that the exhibition had an active religious resonance for other visitors. All these material things, whether clothing or blessed books, had the potential to shape visitor experiences and, importantly, none of these things were selected by the museum staff. However, the curatorial choices regarding what artefacts and topics were displayed partially influenced the types of visitors, behaviours and personal objects visitors brought in.

Following where these personal objects went and what and whom they were confronted with provided a way to observe how these possessions affected their owners and the visitors who witnessed them. The interviews also affirmed that these brought objects acted as a critical node in particular networks of sacred interaction. Some of my informants explained that the absence of certain objects impeded their ability to experience a divine or supernatural presence. The mobility of brought objects helped to address these absences. This was especially evident at the Georgian Orthodox service where objects were brought into the museum to create an altar for

the reliquary to sit on. When these objects were taken to the museum, they essentially brought with them the material and immaterial networks from where they came from. Writing about the ways actors interrelate, Annemarie Mol (2010: 264) stated that within networks “[t]ensions live on and gaps must be bridged”. In the visitor interactions observed, these religious rituals and objects helped to fill these gaps by incorporating actors and practices from other locales. These networks became entwined with the network of the museum visit, creating an engagement that was unique to both sites. The visitors’ subjectivities were a part of this, but they were not the only determinant. Many factors within the space shaped the interactions, ensuring a diverse spectrum of experiences.

Focusing on the material environment not only drew attention to the assemblages of ‘things’ that formed a ‘sacred engagement’, but also showed which actors were absent. My informants often discussed entities that were missing in their engagements or described actors that did not take a material form. Attending to practice addresses this by shedding light on the tangible actors that are incorporated within visitors’ interactions but also on what is lacking, concealed or unknown in their encounters. This, in turn, raises questions in regard to protocols concerning visibility and invisibility and the material and the immaterial (Morgan 2012). Absence is therefore central to the study of materiality, in regard to theological understandings, the study of lived religion and visitor studies. Importantly, absence is not the antithesis of presence as it requires the presence of many actors for the missing actor to be known, for example, if a visitor previously encountered the object in a different locale. Thus, absence is a state of being (as opposed to a state of not being) as even missing entities act. Absence also draws attention to issues such as accessibility, whether it is a profane and logistical matter (for instance, being unable to visit an object in situ) or pertaining to spiritual concerns regarding the sanctity of the object and place. Furthermore, the study of absence within materiality of religion evokes thoughts around emotions such as desire and aversion, which leads to questions regarding the development, persistence and failure of particular rituals and material forms. For instance, at *Treasures* and *Hajj* a number of visitors mentioned the absence of certain scents that they associated with the sacred sites and rituals. These entities, therefore, became points of difference between the exhibition and sites of worship. However, absent actors were rarely mentioned individually. On most occasions, they were referred to as part of assemblages of actors that formed experiences. Thus, remarks about scent often accompanied wider discussions about the absence of certain religious practices, people and places. And so, within the museums, the agency of the non-human entities (including those that are absent) reduced the influence of the visitors, museum staff and even the authorised religious networks.

## **The museum networks**

The museum creates opportunities to experience religious objects in a manner distinct from devotional sites. One example of this was the museum-networks’ ability to facilitate unexpected religious encounters. At *Treasures* a number of religious visitors said that they did not come to

the exhibition to venerate, but to appreciate the beauty of the exhibits and learn about their history. Similarly, visitors to *Hajj* often came seeking an educational experience that differed from the religious teachings about the pilgrimage. These visitors came to the museum with the expectation that the visit would not provide a religious experience and, in most cases, this is what happened. The museum's inability to provide a space conducive to a divine encounter was not, in these examples, a negative experience or a failure. Instead, these experiences demonstrated the different ways the same institution, exhibition or exhibit was encountered.

The objects' religious networks had the ability to surprise a small number of visitors who had expected a nonreligious visit but, through their interactions with various elements of the exhibitions, experienced the presence of the divine. Bialecki (2014: 16) proposed that God's ability to surprise demonstrated the divine actor's alterity and autonomy as an active agent, as opposed to a mere projection of the believer. Bialecki explains:

if God is built of unconnected heterogeneous objects, each with different substrates from the grossly material to the subtlety neurological, each with its own range of internal variability or degree of plasticity, and each with its own unconnected historical trajectory, then one would be little surprised by the fact that as a greater composite object, God displays an effective "will" autonomous of those who in effect produce Him.

Visitors' experiences of the divine were not simply projections but the effect of the contingent interactions of multiple human and non-human actors. For the objects and exhibitions in the museum, their power to surprise was made possible by an assemblage of actors that combined the experiences and beliefs of the visitor. In my fieldwork, I did not come across any nonreligious visitors who had a supernatural or divine encounter, but I did meet lapsed Christians and non-practising Muslims who admitted feeling an unexpected connection to some of the components of the exhibitions. For these visitors, the museum network provided a place to re-connect to elements of their faith, which they may have resisted in other contexts. In these experiences, memories of past practices and teachings played a key role within the networks. In contrast, the Bible tours rarely featured such moments of surprise. The guides' careful management of the visits, and the attendees' commitment to their religious teachings left few opportunities for visitors to experience something unexpected. The multiple and varied encounters afforded by actors in the exhibition, were restricted on the Bible tours which had a clear and focused agenda that rarely deviated. These contrasting examples illustrate the variable presence (and absence) of particular forms of religious authority and power in the museum, which shaped expectations, engagements and recollections.

Whilst every museum visit is different, they share common actors such as the objects and building. However, each interaction brings into the space new elements that change how the museum networks interact with the visitor networks. There is, therefore, precariousness about the visit, in which actors are reshuffled and transformed. But as well as adding an unpredictable

quality to activities, the entwinement of human and material things can also add stability and consistency. Talal Asad (2008) proposes that “ways of life”, by which he means how one engages with the world, “do not change as easily as ideas in one’s head”. Practice stabilises networks. And so, as was witnessed at *Treasures* and *Hajj*, visitors who had a relationship with some of the exhibited objects and themes within their past, were surprised to find that they experienced a form of sacred connection. These encounters involved an element of uncertainty (as the visitors’ response to the objects was unexpected) but also a sense of continuity, as the objects and visitors were previously enmeshed within networks of devotional practice. Falk (2009b: 20) acknowledged that “predicting the museum visitor experience is fundamentally impossible given how many visitors there are and how obviously unique each individual visitor is”. However, institutional, economic and governmental pressures to evidence value and impact have led to a greater demand for visitor evaluation models that anticipate visitor response or, as Falk (2009a: 216) describes his visitor identity-related framework, “provide a useful filter for understanding and predicting much of the visitor experience”. Yet, what actually happens in the museum is dependent on a far greater number of variables than the visitors’ identity and motivations. In regard to lived religion experiences, McGuire (2008: 17) argues that “it is simply impossible to construct a research instrument that anticipates all the possible elements individuals may choose to weave into their own personal beliefs and practices”. Such interactions, therefore, require a framework that explores and unpacks visitor-object engagements without attempting to predict what will happen or what will be involved.

Museums also give a different experience of time in comparison to many religious teachings and rituals. For example, veneration collapses time to enable the devotee to communicate with a historic figure such as a saint. The period in which the saint lived and died therefore becomes present in the moment of the devotee’s interaction with their relic. Similarly, the experience of performing Hajj brings together the times when the Prophets Muhammad and Abraham lived and experienced the direct voice of God. The Jewish and Jehovah’s Witnesses’ readings of the Old Testament perform a similar conflation whereby the actions and the Word of God become folded with the present day. The museum’s collections and interpretations, in contrast, provide a far more diverse array of experiences that allow visitors to engage with other temporal points in the past and present. For instance, a number of Muslim visitors told me that they rarely considered how other pilgrims had performed Hajj as their religious teachings on the pilgrimage focused on the theological origins of the site, the Prophets and their own (present-day) experiences of performing the rituals. At *Treasures*, the visitors were able to see the relics as part of a grander account which incorporated their rise, fall and survival. And on the tours, attendees were able to consider how the archaeological objects that related to the biblical accounts corresponded with other chronologies and narratives. The different presentation and responses to time underscored the distinctiveness of the museum’s interpretation of human history. This, again, reflects the institution’s Enlightenment roots, but also illustrates the different educational agendas of museums in comparison to religious institutions. Museums are therefore able to provide a broader historical perspective.

In *Civilizing Rituals*, Duncan (1995: 1-2) described her approach to conceptualising how the architecture and interiors of museums influence visitor behaviour. She explained:

I propose to treat this ensemble like a script or score – or better, a dramatic field. That is, I see the totality of the museum as a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind, whether or not actual visitors would describe it as such (and whether or not they are prepared to do so).

Fisher (1997: 18) came to a similar conclusion, stating:

The museum is more than a location. It is a script that makes certain acts possible and others unthinkable... When we think of an object as having a fixed set of traits we leave out the fact that only within social scripts are those traits, and not others, visible or even real.

Both Duncan and Fisher recognise the influential role of non-human entities in shaping visitors' interactions. Yet, the analogy of a script presupposes a scriptwriter and although the curator and exhibition designers could be said to inhabit that role, they do so in a small way. The actors in any space do not 'perform' to a prescribed (or predictable) set of actions. If we should evoke a metaphor of the theatre, then I propose that instead of a social script, we conceive the networks as improvisations, whereby the different 'actors', both non-human and human, constitute a performance that can arise spontaneously in ways that cannot be (wholly) predicted.

In order for visitor studies to address the complexities of social relationships that are formed by and through visitor-object engagements, the theoretical and methodological frameworks must shift the emphasis away from the human actors. Capturing religious encounters also requires terms and categories that can be contradicted, challenged and negotiated, so as not to alienate experiences and actors that do not fit. Existing quantitative methods are therefore ineffective for examining 'sacred encounters' in museums as they are too rigid and limited in scope. Studies on religious experiences call for qualitative methods (as demonstrated in this study). Yet, unlike most of the visitor evaluations discussed, this research tried to avoid anticipating the findings. I instead entered the field with a heightened sensitivity in order to capture the different actors involved in the observed embodied acts and/or discussed during the post-visit conversations. Rather than employing categories to structure the findings, this research provided multiple perspectives of the visitor experience by focusing on very different actors, some of which were objects, some experiences and some human. By doing so, themes emerged organically (for instance, time and space) as the networks emerged. Furthermore, visitor research also needs to expand the notion of who (and what) can be social in the museum to ensure the studies account for the full range of human and non-human (and absent) actors that constitute 'sacred encounters'.

## The secular and religious binary

The variety of engagements made possible by the different non-human and human actors within the museum were also shaped by the secular and religious binary that hangs over the museum and the ways in which people consider, articulate and conduct their religious and museum practices. In these contexts, the categories of the secular and the religious did not maintain stable meanings and so did not work in predictable ways. The inconsistent and uncertain manners in which these categories were evoked were especially potent in regard to shaping the norms and protocols about how to behave in the museum as well as how to interact with particular objects and texts. At times, these protocols became a point of confrontation and conflict, but also an opportunity for new experiences to arise.

An example of the ways in which the binary operated was the belief, held by a number of visitors, that the placement of particular devotional objects and religious subject matters, within the 'secular' museum, had the potential to bring visitors closer to a divine/supernatural being. This idea – that museum objects, tours or exhibitions could affect people who are not affiliated to a particular faith – demonstrated a conviction in the power of the exhibits (and tours) as mediators to the divine. For instance, at *Treasures* a Catholic Brother told me that the relics' presence in the British Museum was a "way that they can be accessed by many more people... whether [they] are open to it or not". Such statements recognised the agency of the objects (in collaboration with their associated holy figure) to affect people that may not ordinarily consider relics as conduits to the divine. The objects' placement within the museum was therefore central in enabling these exhibits to encounter new audiences that might never have voluntarily visited a church. Often this comment was expressed when my interviewees considered the advantages and disadvantages of relics not being in a place of worship. Conversely, a couple of visitors to *Treasures* claimed that the exhibition helped to expose the relics as distractions from what they saw as a more legitimate Protestant form of worship. At *Hajj* some Muslim visitors also interpreted the curiosity of non-Muslims as indications that the exhibition was increasing people's interest in Islam. Similarly, on the Bible tours, a number of the guides perceived the interests of passersby as testament to the power of God's Word. The religious visitors understood that it was the objects, topics and texts that harboured the power to 'reach out'. In contrast, the secular museum was understood to play a passive role. However, the museum's perceived potential to bring people to a divine or supernatural being was made possible by the very fact that the institution does not promote nor conduct itself as a place of worship. Instead, the museum's image as a pluralist, 'secular' institution allowed it to circumvent the overt image of religion. This image, which may act as a barrier or deterrent for some visitors, therefore allowed the museum to attract audiences that traditional sites of worship cannot. The museum's 'secular' tag was thus essential to this process.

By contrast, other visitors, who were invested in the idea of the museum as a secular (nonreligious) space, perceived devotional practices performed by religious visitors as a

pollutant. Likewise, those who felt that the museum was facilitating such religious practices saw this as a threat to the institution's (perceived) secular values.<sup>146</sup> For these visitors, the secular and religious existed as opposing categories. And so, religion-themed activities, such as hosting an exhibition on relics, were seen as blurring (and crossing) the boundaries between the secular (museum) and the religious. This was evident in a number of comments voiced to me, but more explicitly conveyed by users of social networking sites. These desires to separate religion from museums were acts and outcomes of purification. Visitors' (and staff's) investments in the religious/secular boundaries reflected past views of British public museums as beacons of the Enlightenment and with secular values. These diverse understandings of the religious/secular boundaries demonstrate that these categories are constructs and that the boundaries are emic and thus function in different ways for different visitors. The museum space enables many different responses to coexist. However, on further exploration, it was clear that there were multiple conflicts, concerns and opportunities in relation to boundaries between the religious and the secular that were being constantly negotiated. Mary Douglas (2003: 2) explained 'dirt' as "matter out of place" that "offends against order". For visitors who were opposed to religious practices in the museum, the devotional acts were out of keeping and thereby "destructive to existing patterns" of order (2003: 117). These tensions were particularly pertinent when the museum visitors (or the staff) saw the museum as a secular institution and the objects as illustrative of historical narratives. The perception that certain visitor practices were 'out of place' was, therefore, heavily influenced by past and present notions of what a museum should and should not be. Again, the museum could in this sense be regarded as relatively passive; as an actor that is unable to prevent pollution by religious/secular actors or control whether or not it becomes a site of religious experience. Yet, as described in the previous chapters, the museum-network included many (human and non-human) actors that hinder such religious acts. Furthermore, the secular (and pluralist) image of the institution will preclude certain communities and individuals from visiting a museum within a religious context. The majority of my informants who addressed the museum as secular (explicitly or implicitly) either viewed the institution as a neutral space in which no form of religion was privileged or as an actively nonreligious space. These perceptions not only shaped how visitors conducted their devotional acts but also how they interpreted the devotional practices performed by others.

In the beginning of this thesis I argued that the secular and religious were not distinct categories but were instead muddled and blurred. However, my interviews and observations demonstrated that visitors, at times, were heavily invested within the secular/religious distinctions both outside and inside the museum. In the process of analysing and interpreting

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<sup>146</sup> The threatening presence of (appearing to encourage) religious practises was expressed by Tiffany Jenkins (2005) who wrote that "Museum directors must not act as priests, nor must they treat the public as their flock... Those with faith already have churches and other places to venerate religious icons. If museums continue to be confused with places of worship, we will all suffer, as the pursuit of truth is sacrificed on the altar of veneration".

my data, I had to differentiate between the analytical boundaries I employed (and queried) and the emic boundaries and categories that were articulated by my informants. Yet the illusion of the secular museum that has influenced (and misled) conceptions about the nature of the visitor experience within academia and the museum sector, was the same illusion (or actor) that influenced many visitors' experiences. The notion of the secular therefore operated as yet another boundary object, providing a varied range of engagements. I therefore propose conceiving the relationship between the secular, the religious and the museum using the language of ANT. Particular assemblages of actors, that include the material features of the museum space and the visitors' pre-existing sensibilities have the ability to form a network that may be perceived as secular or indeed religious. A number of Catholic visitors to *Treasures* said that they saw the museum as a secular institution as the ground it sat on was not consecrated and it lacked many of the actors that they would expect to find at a church. Hence, it was not only the visitors' prior conceptions that constructed this 'secular' constellation of actors but also the presence and absence of certain material actors within the museum and other spaces. Yet, other visitors I spoke to stated that the presence of relics made the building sacred. Thus, the combination of certain visitors and the presence/absence of particular objects formed sacred encounters for some visitors and secular experiences for others. Although many of my other interviewees never (implicitly or explicitly) acknowledged these boundaries at all. The binary between the secular/religious, therefore, varied widely from impermeable to non-existent. However, on occasion, visitors' conflated facets from religious and secular knowledge in order to authenticate particular interpretations. This was apparent at both *Treasures* and on the Bible tours, where visitors (and the guides) used "the language and protocols of 'objective', 'scientific' study... to privilege and legitimate a particular standpoint" (Woodhead 2012: 4). And yet, for most visitors I interviewed, the distinction was far more nuanced and fluid. This was especially evident when visitors described their visit as a form of pilgrimage that differed to those authorised by religious institutions. Visitors to *Hajj* also made a distinction between the holy site of Mecca and the exhibition space, by describing their visit as 'emotional' or 'spiritual' on a personal level as opposed to something that was religious. But often visitors found it difficult to describe the nature of their visit, which may also indicate the blurred nature of these categories.

A recurring theme throughout this thesis was the institution's role in shaping the visitor-object interactions. In the most part, I found the museum's position on religious and spiritual activities ambiguous. For example, the prayer space (or 'Multi-faith Room'), installed during the run of Hajj, highlighted the museum's ambivalence around the presence and provision of religious rituals inside the institution. The British Museum did not want to appear to promote worship and therefore legitimise the occurrence of such practices. However, its commitment to the needs of the visitors (and the museum's desire to increase its audiences) resulted in the staff demarcating a space to accommodate prayer. This compromise led to the establishment of a room that was both temporary and discreet. Similarly, the museum's decision to accommodate private visits for blessings and ceremonies, like the Georgian Orthodox service, showed that the

staff do recognise the devotional relevance of some of its artefacts. However, these private events are not open to the public and little is known of these activities outside those who attend. Such devotional and religious activities, which include the Bible tours, have no permanent status in the museum and leave no trace of their presence. Some of the museum's special public events skirt on the edges of religious and devotional practice, such as the Mexican-themed 'Day of the Dead' event which took place in 2009. Yet this event was more akin to a theatrical performance than actual ancestor worship. Furthermore, it could be argued that the quasi-religious designs of *Treasures* and *Hajj* were conceived by the museum as being more theatrical than devotional (in helping to contextualise the subject). This ambiguity, ambivalence and invisibility contribute to the continuing myth that religious and spiritual practices do not take place in museums.

Secularism, which is often confounded with the terms irreligion and non-religion, can imply a range of meanings that may identify a state of being, a place, an attitude or an activity. In my interviews and discussions with museum visitors, staff and academics, I heard this term used to describe an indifference towards religion, an absence of religion, a rejection of religion, and hostility towards religion. This assemblage of definitions also echoed the diversity of the nonreligious positions visitors identified themselves by. As one would expect, the visitors' reactions towards religious and spiritual interactions were framed by their pre-existing beliefs and views. Because of the self-selecting nature of the activities I studied (which assumed a level of interest and knowledge, but also a tolerance and, in some instances, an affiliation towards the subject matter), I found very little apathy and active opposition to religion amongst my informants. What is more, only a very small proportion objected to other visitors performing religious practices. These reactions relate (albeit in contrast) to the concerns expressed by the interviewed religious visitors about exposing their devotional practices and objects to nonreligious audiences. Lois Lee (2011) proposes that attending to 'difference from religion' as opposed to the 'rejection of religion' allows researchers to account for a greater range of relationships between religious individuals and those whose views are differentiated from religion (by them or others). A number of visitors to the studied exhibitions described their interactions with the displays, as Lee suggests, through a lens of difference. These nonreligious responses took the form of curiosity, academic and artistic interests, as well as the wish to understand the religious practices of friends and relatives. Again, the same space and objects facilitated these different ways of engaging, by forming a distinct constellation of actors. This was partly due to the self-selecting nature of the exhibition, which suggested that these nonreligious visitors (who paid to attend), possessed a disposition towards encountering difference.

The museum may also give rise to experiences that are perceived as more potent than previous engagements with similar objects at devotional sites. However, the visitors who made such remarks were usually eager to explain that their visit may have enriched certain experiences (such as being able to see more objects or spend longer looking at them), but this did not make

the encounter 'religiously' superior. For example, at *Treasures*, I spoke to a Catholic priest and a member from his parish, a 19-year-old called Ben. During the interview, Ben compared the objects at the exhibition to those in his local church, remarking that the objects at *Treasures* were "a bit more grand" in comparison. Aware that the Priest was standing next to him, Ben sheepishly added: "I dare say". To this the Priest replied, "The saints are the same whether the [reliquaries are] worth millions or worth pennies." Unlike Ben, the Priest did not want to compare or elevate the status of the objects at *Treasures* at risk of insulting and undermining the role of the saints, but also because it focused too much on the materiality, provenance and commercial value of the exhibits. By contrast, at *Haji*, a number of Muslim visitors expressed how much they appreciated being able to see and spend time with the sitara (part of the cover from the Ka'ba in Mecca), without the crowds and rituals. However, the visitors were also keen to explain that this helped them appreciate the object as a work of art. These Muslim visitors wanted to make a distinction, but instead of saying that the objects held the same sacred value regardless of their location, the sitara in the museum was perceived (by some visitors) as profane. The sitara in the museum was now profane. This process of constructing and collapsing categories and hierarchies illustrates the visitors' attempts to protect and defend the sacred qualities of their religious practices from the (threat of) inappropriate and improper ways of engagement.

### **Forming sacred connections**

By understanding museum interactions as assemblages, we can see that certain configurations of actor-networks make sacred engagements more likely to happen. Museums can therefore display objects within a certain design and formation in order to change the configuration and thus favour a particular set of responses. And yet, as discussed, there is no guarantee that the museum staff's intentions will operate as intended. At *Treasures*, for example, a number of visitors commended the monastic music for helping them to focus on the objects. However, the music's contribution in creating a space conducive to devotional acts was less about the presence of sacred chants and more about its ability to drown out the sounds of other visitors. The low lighting was also mentioned by some visitors as helping to create a "reverential atmosphere". Yet, some visitors criticised the lighting for making it difficult to see and focus on the objects' religious symbols and images. Although the exhibition design impacted upon many visitors' experiences, the diverse responses suggest sacred encounters are highly subjective and contingent. Furthermore, if the space is not quiet and the object has no religious affiliation, a sacred encounter is not impossible, it is just less probable. The museum does not need to be active in providing the exhibits and atmosphere to enable religious interactions, but the presence of certain actors (including mundane objects such as benches) may help.

Museum staff who consider the institution as 'secular', and actively avoid imitating religious forms of display, do not prevent visitors from performing devotional acts. To say that an exhibition design prevents religious practices affords the museum too much power. Even when

the 'secular' label is explicitly stated, by the staff, press or visitors, this does not mean sacred encounters are not possible. Conversely, a museum that provides a space that imitates many of the attributes found in a place of worship may not always lead to a devotional experience. In fact, it may have the opposite effect. For example, an exhibition that attempts to create a church-like ambience may prompt critical responses from some visitors who, if overheard, may deter other visitors from performing a religious act themselves. Similarly, the exhibition may install a pilgrimage-themed journey as part of an exhibition (as seen at *Hajj*). However, emulating elements of a religious place and experience may expose what is missing, whether it be material things or a divine or supernatural actor. Moreover, such attempts may feel contrived and highlight the museum's inability to foster devotional experiences. The many variables within the museum and visitor networks make these assemblages particularly fluid and unstable. By contrast, the Bible tour guides' careful management of the museum visits show how certain networks do provide a more stable constellation through the efforts of the guides and the very specific self-selection criteria of the attendees. The tours' abilities to generate more consistent experiences reveal the significance of power and authority in the network. The Bible and guides were able to exert authority, in part because the attendees came to the museum expecting to be led using the Scriptures. These expectations were shaped by the attendees' relationship with the Bible text, which plays a central role within their religious practices. Yet, unlike the exhibitions that worked to evoke a devotional ambience, the Bible tours were not designed to feel like a sacred site in order to give their attendees a sense of a religious place. This would have distracted from their message. Instead the tours worked to create a space that was conducive to learning and affirming their biblical teachings. In a conversation with one of the Bible tour guides, I asked if he had considered incorporating a visit to the *Treasures* exhibition within his tours. He told me that there was no need as one of their tours already focused on the "pagan customs" within Christianity, and central to this tour was the polytheistic origins of the practices (which *Treasures* only briefly touched on). Furthermore, the exhibition's music, quietude, lighting and layout would have made it very difficult for the guides to construct a counter-narrative that debunked the practice of relic veneration.<sup>147</sup> And so the agendas and forms of religious practices performed by the visitors and groups created very different kinds of networks, of which (the selection of) space and design played a crucial part. For the exhibitions the ambience helped many visitors to imagine and understand the rituals, whereas for the tours, the groups sought to manage the museum environment in order to privilege their own (biblical) content. This attempt to control the space was partly afforded by the networks of the public galleries, which permit a diverse array of visits to take place. Mol (2010: 266) proposed that actors *attune* to other actors around them and so become "more sensitive and better capable of seeing, hearing, tasting, feeling". Over time, the Bible tour-networks have become attuned to the museum-networks. Yet, as Mol (2010: 259) asserts, these networks are "simultaneously interdependent and in tension" since only a minor

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<sup>147</sup> The exhibition ticket price was also a deterrent.

reshuffling of (human and non-human) actors may lead to a different experience outside of what the tour guides intended. Thus, even highly managed museum tours are subject to the tensions that pull and push across the various networks.

A key difference between the three findings chapters concerned the central material actor that mediated the divine. For example, sacred experiences at *Treasures* involved material devotional objects displayed in the exhibition space. As a result, visitors who venerated had to make greater efforts to negotiate the material environment of the exhibition (and its visitors), which could obstruct their religious practices. At *Hajj* the material site (i.e. the pilgrimage destination) was absent and could only be referred to in the exhibition. Consequently, visitors' memories of (and aspirations to perform) Hajj played a key role in allowing visitors to contemplate the divine presence. However, for the majority of visitors I spoke to, the exhibition could not facilitate a direct sacred encounter. On the tours, the sacred object (Scripture) was brought into the museum by the visitor, which enabled the attendees to link every (pre-selected) artefact encounter to the divine. Due to the constant presence of the Bible, together with the social composition and management of the tours, the guides were able to construct a far more religiously-structured museum experience. Each of these fields involved visitors bringing their habituated religious sensibilities and knowledge to their visit as well as an array of embodied practices, from kissing cases to reading Bibles. The divine actor, operating across these three fields as a boundary object, was connected to visitors via different mediators. These mediators, both material and immaterial, reflected the authorised teachings of the visitors' respective religions. However, each interaction related to the divine actor differently, with some assemblages failing to evoke a sacred connection. By understanding the sacred as a dynamic field (as opposed to a static property that is locked in the object and kept in the past), attention is drawn to the complex forms of connectedness that exist between actors that may arise from (or generate) frictions, disruptions and substitutions.

This empirical research drew attention to the complex and changeable relationships that exist between the sacred, time and space. The temporal nature of the studied exhibitions presented a sacredness that was both ephemeral and transient. Whether the sacredness was an echo of another place (as was the case at *Hajj*) or was made accessible through the physical presence of objects (as was seen at *Treasures*), the sacredness only existed in the time that the exhibitions ran. It was also a different kind of sacred space to consecrated sites that follow an authorised process of consecration, such as the sanctification of an altar. By identifying the sacred as a form of agency, the sacred quality had the potential to arise at any place and at any time so long as the necessary actors were present. Thus, every sacred evocation required constant activity in order to maintain these associations. The fact that these divine actors were understood to be omnipresent and eternal, however, meant that for devotees there was much greater potential for these moments of sacred connection to build on other assemblages during and across an individual's life. In this sense, then, encounter with the divine, eternal actor builds on a potentially much richer history of networks and moments of connection than an

individual's experience of a non-eternal, 'absent' actor such as the celebrity curator of an exhibition or a celebrated historical figure. This distinction is important for understanding the differences, in actor-network terms, of networks involving engagement with eternal, omnipresent divine figures and examples of moments of sacred 'secular' identifications with artists, celebrities or historical actors. Take the example of the visitors who wanted to see the British Museum's round Reading Room because of its connection to past readers such as Lenin and Bram Stoker. As described in Chapter 5, visitors who asked to peer into the former library hoped to see the Victorian desks on which the now-famous readers once worked. When the Reading Room still functioned as such, visitors could even locate the very desk Karl Marx wrote *Das Kapital*. Like the relics at *Treasures*, the visitors' connection to the political and literary figures was mediated by an assemblage of material and immaterial actors. Moreover, and as witnessed, visitors did not even need to see the desks. Like the concealed or absent relics in the reliquaries, knowing (or being told) that they were close was enough to give them a sense of their presence. A similar experience was observed at the exhibition *Grayson Perry* where visitors described experiencing the immanent presence of the artist and his inner world. For these visitors, the artist's presence was made present through the physical attendance of his work, the first-person label texts and the visitors' previous knowledge of the artist.

In many respects the theoretical approach and cases in the thesis speak to such moments of deeper investment and engagement in the museum space when an assemblage makes possible an encounter between the visitor and a valued, absent actor. The processes by which religious assemblages discussed in the thesis create networks through which visitor experience arises through the interplay of presence and absence has the potential to be equally applicable. But a central finding of this thesis is precisely that such encounters and assemblages – of what some have referred to as examples of a 'secular' sacred – can still be distinguished in significant ways from the religious assemblages analysed in the preceding chapters. As just noted, the fact that divine actors within religious assemblages are experienced as eternal and omnipresent creates different conditions for prior experience of devoted visitors before they enter the museum. If, as argued, visitor experiences in museums are constituted on their previous object-mediated experiences, then assemblages with actors considered eternal and omnipresent (such as God) have much richer potential for extensive and pervasive moments of contact than with a celebrity or valued historical figure. Two other significant distinctions can be made between religious assemblages with divine figures and moments of 'secular sacred' experience for the visitor. For the most part, the degree of value invested in the divine actor is greater than that invested in the celebrity, artist or valued historical figure however strong the visitor's identification with such 'secular' absent actors are. Devotees' prior collective ritual experiences and sensitivities predispose them to perceive certain forms of embodied, aesthetic and social interaction with the object-mediated divine actor as appropriate and inappropriate. This can sharpen their experience of discontinuity between these previous experiences and moments of encounter with the mediated divine figure in the museum space. For example, as previously described, a number of Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians at *Treasures* felt that other

visitors' conversations about the relics' authenticity were inappropriate in the presence of the objects. The shock or visceral discomfort evoked by overhearing such comments was less likely to have an analogy in 'secular sacred' encounters with valued absent actors precisely because of the nature and frequency of devotees' experience of interaction with the divine absent actor before entering the museum.

A second difference relates precisely to the cultural power of religious/secular binaries, discussed in the previous section of this chapter. Imagined encounters with Lenin and Grayson Perry in the space of the museum may share some features of encounter with the absent actor that can be found in religious assemblages discussed in this thesis. But the significance of religious/secular binaries, however these were understood and deployed, became much greater for objects in the museum identified with specific religious traditions or divine figures. This may appear an obvious point, but in practice has a significant bearing on the visitor's experience of the religious assemblage as religious/secular distinctions shape visitors' interpretations of the nature of the museum space and what constitutes appropriate interactions within it. Encounters with divine figures mediated through particular objects and images in the museum are different to moments of deep identification with 'nonreligious' absent actors like Perry and Lenin precisely because of the additional influence that religious/secular binaries play for different actors within the religious assemblage.

These points about the distinctiveness of the religious assemblage go to the heart of the distinctive contribution that this thesis seeks to make both to the field of museum studies and the study of material religion. In the case of museum studies, previous work on religion within the museum has tended to neglect the significance of religious encounters with divine figures, reducing religion either to another form of cultural identity or considering such interactions with divine actors in the context of 'exotic' indigenous religions, implicitly separated from an assumed modern, Western secular gaze (e.g. Ames 1992 and Simpson 1996). Some facets of assemblages discussed in this thesis – for example, the interaction with the absent actors – may be shared with interactions with valued absent actors in the museum space such as artists, celebrities or historical figures. But as has been argued here, religious assemblages in which a visitor experiences contact with a divine figure in the space of the museum have certain distinctive qualities. These are not limited to indigenous religious traditions and communities, but a facet of widespread religious traditions and communities in which millions of museum visitors participate. This thesis seeks to contribute to a much better understanding of the ways in which such religious assemblages operate than currently exists within a museum studies literature in which the notion of engagement with a divine figure in the museum remains an exoticised and marginalised area of interest

By contrast work within the study of material religion, greater attention is beginning to be paid to such materially mediated engagements with divine actors. In doing so, this body of work is responding to Robert Orsi's (2005) challenge to find ways of writing about religion that take

seriously inter-subjective engagements between devotees and divine actors. As Orsi notes, such engagements are not limited to moments of mystical encounter, emphasised within some liberal accounts of religious life, but take a much wider range of forms. This thesis adds to an understanding of the myriad ways in which devotees experience moments of encounter with divine figures in the context of the public museum, encounters which go beyond the awe, fascination and deep emotional absorption that are assumed in visitor evaluation frameworks in which 'peak experiences' are seen as the pinnacle of visitor experience. As we have seen such encounters are equally likely to be experienced in the context of a desire for faithful learning, nostalgia or accessing still potent forms of spiritual power. In the context of material religion studies, this thesis adds new knowledge to how such encounters take place in spaces beyond those consecrated by religious institutions, in particular spaces managed by public institutions whose attitudes towards religion may at times be ambiguous and contradictory. The thesis shows how devotees' encounters with divine figures in such complex, non-consecrated public spaces draw on previous experiences of religious assemblages in consecrated spaces. The strength of these previous associations shows devotees remarkably capable of resisting the attempts of museum curators and exhibition designers to frame religious objects and figures in ways that they consider alien to their more established religious habits of feeling and perception. Yet at the same time, devotees' experience of religious assemblages within the museum are not determined by these prior experiences, but become a new kind of hybrid experience made possible by the distinctive assemblages of actors that occur within the museum space. The account of such experiences presented in this thesis indicate both a continuity in religious ways of experiencing over which museums have little power, but also a precariousness for the religious visitor in which their engagement with the materially-mediated divine figure is always open to new – and often unsettling – possibilities given the distinctive assemblages that are made possible through museum exhibitions.

### **Beyond the museum visit**

This study centred on the physical space of the museum. However, there were instances where I followed the actors out of the institution, such as visiting a site mentioned by one of my informants or meeting the visitor again at their home. Exploring other sites enabled a greater insight into visitors' pre-existing (and sometimes subsequent) sensibilities and experiences. For instance, some visitors remarked that glass cases presented an obstacle in their ability to venerate in the museum. But on visiting (or looking online) at the mentioned sites of worship, I saw that many of these places also featured glass cases, leading me to question why the cases were perceived as barriers in the museum but not at these other sites. Although it was not possible within the time constraints of this project, the ability to trace actors across multiple sites would have presented a much larger and more detailed network that may have raised more questions and opportunities for further research. Going beyond the museum may also

have revealed other places that provided sacred encounters but, like the museum, are not recognised as devotional.<sup>148</sup> However, following the visitors' movements outside of the museum may have placed too much emphasis on the human actors. And so, by concentrating on a fixed time and place, this research was able to focus on tracing how different visitors, objects and immaterial actors impacted upon one another within the confines of one building.

The engagements that I observed and discussed in this thesis are part of everyday life, as lived experiences, but museum encounters do not happen 'every day'. For most people, museum visits are infrequent. So what happens the rest of the time? Are there other sites that operate in a similar way? Objects in museums mostly present fleeting moments of interaction. Thus, multiple engagements with an object may take the form of repeated visits to that exhibit, but it may also arise in other ways, such as engaging with the object online or in a catalogue. Alternatively, the museum object may become one component within an assemblage of objects that are displayed in a number of locales. This may take the form of different statues of the same deity, different relics from the same saint or different texts from the same canon. For that matter it is not always about the autonomous object, but the collective. In other words, the museum is not an isolated experience that terminates on the visitor exiting the building. Rather, experiences accumulate over time and in many places. Although the focus of this study was narrow, the studied interactions provided a detailed glimpse into the ways public material environments are engaged in religious practices. In respect of the relationship between the macro and micro, Latour (2005: 177) argued:

The macro is neither 'above' nor 'below' the interactions, but added to them as another of their connections, feeding them and feeding off of them... For each of the 'macro places', the same type of questions can be raised. The answer provided by fieldwork will bring attention back to a local site and re-describe them as some dishevelled arrays of connections...

The macro is formed by a multitude of interconnected and interdependent micro networks. By centring on individual visitors and objects at one museum, more networks within other physical spaces inevitably came to light which, consequently, provided a richer picture of the nature of these lived practices within and beyond the museum site.

Museums are ideal sites to examine the ways people engage with religion, whether as part of their own religious practices or as ways of engaging with the rituals, material culture and ideas of others. The museum, as described, provides a very different framework to experience divine and supernatural actors, when examined alongside places of worship. Due to the nature of the exhibitions studied, comparisons were frequently made between the museum experience and

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<sup>148</sup> For example, some of the Bible tours include trips to the Greenwich Observatory, whilst the students who practise shamanic homeopathy also visit botanical gardens (as part of their course).

designated sites of devotion, and yet, for some people places of worship feature very little in their lives or not at all. And so museums may become one of many public spaces that enable sacred experiences to take place in the absence or rejection of traditional devotional sites. This was evident at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery where the staff worked with the local Gujarati community to display a 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu shrine alongside contemporary offerings. As there was no Hindu temple within Brighton, the museum staff “hoped that the shrine would serve as an important public focus for the local community” (Parker 2004: 64). In their efforts to engage with the local Hindu groups, the museum essentially became partaker in these religious acts, playing the role of caretaker for the offerings and their associated devotional practice. This was also witnessed in the case of the Georgian Orthodox ceremony, albeit for one day.

The privileging of the visitor, the perception of museums as secular and the lack of research into material religious practices in spaces which are not intended to be devotional, have obscured and concealed the complex and often contradictory nature of divine and supernatural experiences in museums. Through addressing these significant oversights within museum visitor studies and adopting a framework that makes visible what is often ignored, the mapping of networks presented a view of what actors, both human and non-human, constitute ‘sacred encounters’. The task of mapping also showed how these same actors could produce experiences that failed to evoke a sacred presence. And so, by understanding visitor-object engagements as networks of human and non-human actors, this thesis presented a picture of how such connections to the divine or supernatural are formed, maintained, broken or resisted. Thereby through adopting the tools of ANT, and plotting constellations that attend to the different actors that overlap and blur into many different interactions, it was possible to create a far more nuanced and sensitive understanding of the place of the sacred within museum experiences.

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# APPENDICES

Interview data .....	261
Information sheet .....	268
Consent Form .....	270
Photograph Consent Form .....	271
Interview questionnaires.....	272

## Interview data

### *Treasures of Heaven: saints, relics and devotion in medieval Europe*

Dates: 26 June to 9 October 2011

Interviews conducted	87
Observation hours (approx)	40

#### **Composition**

Individuals	32
Families or couples	16
Organised visit from a place of worship	16
School or college groups	2
Attendee(s) to the community groups preview	6
Friends or colleagues	13
Post-exhibition follow-up interviews*	2

At *Treasures*, I conducted 83 interviews at the exit and 5 in-depth interviews at the British Museum's café or at the visitor's home. The average (mean) duration for the exit interviews was 12 minutes and 41 seconds (the longest being 36 minutes 21 seconds and shortest at 3 minutes 21 seconds). The in-depth interviews averaged one hour. Taking into consideration the visitors interviewed individually and in groups, a total of 138 visitors participated in the interviews. The gender, age and religious identity of these participants were as follows

#### Gender

Female	86
Male	52
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>

#### Age group

8-11 years	3
12-14 years	3
15-16 years	2
17-19 years	9
20-24 years	13
25-34 years	25
35-44 years	24

45-54 years	16
55-59 years	18
60-64 years	9
65+	16
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>

Religious identity (answered from list)

Christian (denomination not stated)	14
Catholic	42
Eastern Orthodox	15
Church of England	29
Methodist	2
Presbyterian	2
Pentecostal	2
Refused	5
No religion	17
Jewish	3
Buddhist	1
Muslim	4
Other (*"New Age")	2*
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>

Follow-up questions about *Treasures* were also asked during the *Grayson Perry* and *Hajj* exit interviews and at the British Museum events.

***Hajj – Journey to the heart of Islam***

Dates: 26 January – 15 April 2012

Interviews conducted	72
Observation hours (approx)	30
<b>Composition</b>	
Individuals	30

Families or couples	20
Organised visit from a place of worship	1
Attendee(s) to the community groups preview	6
Friends or colleagues	15

At *Hajj*, I conducted 73 interviews at the exit. The average (mean) duration for the exit interviews was 11 minutes and 13 seconds (the longest being 29 minutes 40 seconds and shortest at 3 minutes 33 seconds).

Taking into consideration the visitors interviewed individually and in groups, a total of 119 visitors participated in the interviews. The gender, age and religious identity of these participants were as follows

#### Gender

Female	66
Male	53
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>

#### Age group

8-11 years	3
12-14 years	3
15-16 years	0
17-19 years	19
20-24 years	26
25-34 years	20
35-44 years	23
45-54 years	11
55-59 years	8
60-64 years	4
65+	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>

#### Religious identity (if any)

Christian (denomination not stated)	13
-------------------------------------	----

Catholic	4
Bahai	1
Hindu	2
Refused	2
No religion	16
Jewish	0
Buddhist	3
Muslim	75
Other	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>119</b>

***Grayson Perry: The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman***

Dates: 6 October 2011 to 26 February 2012

Interviews conducted	18
Observation hours (approx)	4

**Composition**

Individuals	9
Families or couples	3
School or college groups	1
Friends or colleagues	5

At *Grayson Perry*, I conducted 18 interviews at the exit. The average (mean) duration for the exit interviews was 10 minutes and 34 seconds (the longest being 17 minutes 33 seconds and shortest at 5 minutes 2 seconds).

Taking into consideration the visitors interviewed individually and in groups, a total of 29 visitors participated in the interviews. The gender, age and religious identity of these participants were as follows

Gender

Female	21
Male	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

Religious identity (if any)

Christian	7
Protestant	3
Refused	5
No religion	9
Jewish	1
Buddhist	2
Catholic	1
Other (*Mixture)	1*
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

Age group

17-19 years	3
20-24 years	12
25-34 years	5
35-44 years	4
45-54 years	2
55-59 years	0
60-64 years	1
65+	2
Total	29

**Tour groups**

**Dates: conducted 2011 – 2012**

Participant observed tours	6
Tour guide interviews	8
Tour guide attendee interviews	12

For the tours, I conducted 20 interviews (guides and attendees). The average (mean) duration for these interviews was 23 minutes and 43 seconds (the longest being 1 hour, 4 minutes and 33 seconds and shortest at 5 minutes 26 seconds). Taking into consideration the visitors interviewed individually and in groups, a total of 29 visitors participated in the interviews. The gender, age and religious identity of these participants were as follows:

Gender

Female	12
Male	17
Total	29

**Religious identity**

Christian (Protestant)	3
Jehovah's Witnesses	18
Jewish	5
Buddhist	2
Other (*Pagan)	1*
Total	29

Age group

8-11 years	1
12-14 years	
15-16 years	
17-19 years	
20-24 years	2
25-34 years	7
35-44 years	4
45-54 years	4

55-59 years	5
60-64 years	4
65+	2
Total	29

Additionally, six interviews were conducted at the British Museum members' event (28 May 2012) with questions that covered attendance (and nonattendance) to all the studied exhibitions.

Twelve interviews were conducted with British Museum staff.

# Information sheet for Participants

**Research project:** Visitor engagement with museum objects

I would like to invite you to participate in this doctorate research project conducted in collaboration with the University of Kent and the British Museum. You should only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Take time to read the following information carefully and if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information, please speak to the researcher.

## **What is the purpose of the study?**

The project aims to explore the ways in which visitors engage with objects displayed at the British Museum. The study will examine the various factors which influence how museum visitors encounter particular objects.

## **What do I have to do?**

I would like you to take part in an interview at the British Museum, which last approximately 30 minutes. The interview will include questions concerning your responses and thoughts to particular objects within the Museum and will also include demographic questions. You can choose not to answer any of the questions if you do not feel comfortable answering them or do not know the answer.

## **Why have I been chosen?**

I am asking people who have an interest in museums or particular objects so I can gain an understanding of how visitors from different backgrounds engage with museum objects.

## **Do I have to take part?**

There is no requirement for you to take part. You do not have to give any reason for not wanting to participate.

## **Can I withdraw at a later stage?**

You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. In addition to withdrawing yourself from the study, you may also withdraw any information you have already provided up until it is transcribed for use in the final report. By withdrawing from this study, any data that you feature in (e.g. transcripts, images and audio) will be erased.

## **Are there any risks?**

The research does not involve anything which might put you at risk.

## **Is the information I give confidential?**

Yes. All information you give is confidential, accessible only by the researcher. Information obtained from the interviews may be used in the compilation of a research report and may appear in journal publications. In order to maintain your privacy, pseudonyms will be used and any information which could identify you will be omitted. Lists of pseudonyms linked to names and personal information will be stored securely and recordings of interviews (subject to your permission) will be deleted upon transcription. All data will be collected and stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

## **What will happen to the photographs and audio recordings?**

If you appear or are involved in the taking of any photographs or audio, the researcher will ask you if you

are happy for some or all of the images to be used in the research report and possible publications (and sign a consent form relating to the images).

**Will I be contacted again?**

You may be asked whether you are happy to be contacted about participating in this study at a later date. Your current participation will not be affected should you choose not to be re-contacted. If you have requested copies of research transcripts or photographs (for which you are featured) and/or the research report, the researcher will keep your contact details in a password-protected file and send you the requested materials as soon as they are available.

**If you have any questions or concerns about your participation in this study, please contact the** researcher Steph Berns at [sberns@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](mailto:sberns@thebritishmuseum.ac.uk) or write to the British Museum: Interpretation Office, Great Russell Street, London WC1B 3DG.

If you do decide to take part you will be given this Information Sheet to keep and be asked to sign the appropriate consent form(s).

# British Museum visitor interview

## Consent Form

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide to sign this form and participate in this research. You will be given a copy of this form to keep and refer to at any time.

Please tick: **Yes** or **No**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I may ask further questions at any time.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

I understand I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and to decline to answer any particular questions. Should I choose to withdraw, I understand that the data that I feature in (e.g. transcripts/images will be erased).

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

I agree to provide information to the researcher(s) on the understanding that my name will not be used without my permission. The information will be used only for this research and publications and presentations arising from this research.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

I am over 18 years of age.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

I agree to the interview being (audio) recorded.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

I understand that I have the right to ask for the dictaphone to be turned off at any time during the interview.

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

I agree to be contacted in the future by the researcher in regard to participating in follow-up studies to this project, or in future studies of a similar nature. (If yes, please provide your contact details at the bottom of this form.)

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

**I agree to take part in the study.**

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

Signed .....

Date .....

Full name .....

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation and what your contribution will be. If you wish to be contacted when this research is completed/published please provide your contact details on the back of this form.

# British Museum visitor participation

## Photograph Consent Form

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this research project on museum object engagement. As part of your participation your image was captured on digital photographs. The research organiser would like to use some of these photographs for this research and publications and presentations arising from this research. Your image may or may not be published but in case they are I would be grateful if you would read the form below and decide if you would give consent. However, should you choose to withdraw your consent for some or all of the images that you appear in, please indicate below and the digital images specified will be erased.

Please tick  
**Yes** or **No**

I grant the research organiser the right to use **all** of the photographs for this research and publications and presentations arising from this research.

Or

I grant the research organiser the right to use **some, but not all**, of the photographs, as specified below, for this research and publications and presentations arising from this research.

I give my consent for photo numbers (see numbered image sheet attached):

.....  
.....  
.....

If answered **yes** to any of the above.

I understand that the image(s) will remain the property of the researcher and that my personal details will remain confidential.

Signed ..... Date .....

Full name .....

If you wish to be contacted when this research is completed/published please provide your email address below. Your contact details will remain strictly confidential.

Would you like copies of your images sent to you?  
(If yes, please provide your address above.)

Date:

Time:

## *Treasures of Heaven*

### Questionnaire

*Hi, my name is Steph and I'm conducting research on this exhibition. May I have a few minutes of your time for a brief interview? Thank you. Please do not feel pressured to answer in any particular way. We will not be offended by any negative responses. Your responses are completely anonymous.*

#### **1. General**

- a) Have you been to the Museum before?
- b) **[If yes]** What have you seen before?

#### **2. Pre-visiting**

- a) Did you plan to visit this exhibition? Why?
- b) How did you hear about the exhibition? Who/what was it? What was said?

#### **3. About the exhibition**

- c) How long did you spend in the exhibition?
- d) What were your impressions?
- e) Overall, did the exhibition affect you in any way?
- f) Were you drawn to some objects more than others? If so, what were they?
- g) Were there objects that you were less drawn to, did not like or jarred?
- h) **[If with a group]** Were there particular objects or texts that prompted you to share your thoughts or discuss with others?

#### **4. The museum setting**

- i) Did the fact that you are in a museum and not a place of worship change how you experienced these objects?
- b) Did the exhibition make you think of places you have been to before? In what ways? How did this affect your experience? What was different?

#### **5. If it's ok I'd like to ask you two or three questions more generally about religion...**

- a) Do you have any involvement or experience with a particular religion, either now or in the past?
- b) **[If yes]** Did today's exhibition have any significance for you in terms of your own religious beliefs?
- c) Did you feel a closeness to God/holy figure today?

## Demographics

I would now like to ask some questions about you. These are strictly for classification purposes and your name will not be recorded.

6  Male  Female

7 In which country do you currently live?

8 Which ethnic group would you describe yourself as being in?

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Asian British          | 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Black Caribbean          | 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Other mixed        |
| 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Indian                 | 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Black African            | 14 <input type="checkbox"/> White British      |
| 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani              | 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Other African background | 15 <input type="checkbox"/> White Irish        |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi            | 10 <input type="checkbox"/> White & Black African   | 16 <input type="checkbox"/> White Other        |
| 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese                | 11 <input type="checkbox"/> White & Black Caribbean | 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Other Ethnic group |
| 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian background | 12 <input type="checkbox"/> White and Asian         | 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say  |

9 Who are you here with?

- |  |   |                                    |
|--|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. <input type="checkbox"/> Alone        | 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Children        | 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Adults |
| 4. <input type="checkbox"/> School Party | 5. <input type="checkbox"/> Organised group |                                    |

10 What age group do you fall into?

- |  |  |                                       |
|--|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. <input type="checkbox"/> 0-7 yrs            | 2. <input type="checkbox"/> 8-11 yrs   | 3. <input type="checkbox"/> 12-14 yr  |
| 4. <input type="checkbox"/> 15-16 yrs          | 5. <input type="checkbox"/> 17-19 yrs  | 6. <input type="checkbox"/> 20-24 yr  |
| 7. <input type="checkbox"/> 25-34 yrs          | 8. <input type="checkbox"/> 35-44 yrs  | 9. <input type="checkbox"/> 45-54 yrs |
| 10. <input type="checkbox"/> 55-59 yrs         | 11. <input type="checkbox"/> 60-64 yrs | 12. <input type="checkbox"/> 65+ yrs  |
| 13. <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say |  |                                       |

11 Which of the following best describes your religion?

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> No religion         | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Catholic                 | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Orthodox Christian |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Protestant – which? | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Other Christian – which? |   |
| 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Muslim              | 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Hindu                    | 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish             |
| 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Sikh                | 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist                | 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Other – which?    |
| 12 <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say  |   |   |

Date:

Time:

## *Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam*

### Questionnaire

*Hi, my name is Steph and I'm conducting research on this exhibition. May I have a few minutes of your time for a brief interview? Thank you. Please do not feel pressured to answer in any particular way. We will not be offended by any negative responses. Your responses are completely anonymous.*

#### 1. General

- a) Have you been to the Museum before?
- b) **[If yes]** What have you seen before?

#### 2. Pre-visiting

- a) Did you plan to visit this exhibition? Why?
- b) How did you hear about the exhibition? Who/what was it? What was said?

#### 3. About the exhibition

- a) How long did you spend in the exhibition?
- b) What were your impressions?
- c) Overall, did the exhibition affect you in any way?
- d) Were you drawn to some aspects of the exhibition more than others? If so, what were they?
- j) Were there aspects of the exhibition that you were less drawn to, did not like or jarred?
- e) **[If with a group]** Were there particular objects or sections of the exhibition prompted you to share your thoughts or discuss with others?
- f) **[If been on Hajj]** How does it feel to see some of the objects?

#### 4. If it's ok I'd like to ask you two or three questions more generally about religion...

- a) Do you have any involvement or experience with a particular religion, either now or in the past?
- b) Did today's exhibition have any significance for you in terms of your own religious beliefs? How so?
- c) **[If yes]** Have you performed Hajj or the lesser pilgrimage?

#### 5. **[If observed at the comments book]** Why did you leave a comment/read the comments?

## Demographics

I would now like to ask some questions about you. These are strictly for classification purposes and your name will not be recorded.

6  Male  Female

7 In which country do you currently live?

8 Which ethnic group would you describe yourself as being in?

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Asian British          | 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Black Caribbean          | 13 <input type="checkbox"/> Other mixed        |
| 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Indian                 | 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Black African            | 14 <input type="checkbox"/> White British      |
| 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Pakistani              | 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Other African background | 15 <input type="checkbox"/> White Irish        |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Bangladeshi            | 10 <input type="checkbox"/> White & Black African   | 16 <input type="checkbox"/> White Other        |
| 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Chinese                | 11 <input type="checkbox"/> White & Black Caribbean | 17 <input type="checkbox"/> Other Ethnic group |
| 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Other Asian background | 12 <input type="checkbox"/> White and Asian         | 18 <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say  |

9 Who are you here with?

- |  |   |                                    |
|--|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. <input type="checkbox"/> Alone        | 2. <input type="checkbox"/> Children        | 3. <input type="checkbox"/> Adults |
| 4. <input type="checkbox"/> School Party | 5. <input type="checkbox"/> Organised group |                                    |

10 What age group do you fall into?

- |  |                                       |  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. <input type="checkbox"/> 0-7 yrs            | 2. <input type="checkbox"/> 8-11 yrs  | 3. <input type="checkbox"/> 12-14 yrs  | 4. <input type="checkbox"/> 15-16 yrs |
| 5. <input type="checkbox"/> 17-19 yrs          | 6. <input type="checkbox"/> 20-24 yrs | 7. <input type="checkbox"/> 25-34 yrs  | 8. <input type="checkbox"/> 35-44 yrs |
| 9. <input type="checkbox"/> 45-54 yrs          | 10 <input type="checkbox"/> 55-59 yrs | 11. <input type="checkbox"/> 60-64 yrs | 12 <input type="checkbox"/> 65+ yrs   |
| 13. <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say |                                       |  |                                       |

11 Which of the following best describes your religion?

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| 1 <input type="checkbox"/> No religion     | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Muslim – Sunni     | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Muslim – Shi’a |
| 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Muslim – Other  | 5 <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist           | 6 <input type="checkbox"/> Hindu          |
| 7 <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish          | 8 <input type="checkbox"/> Christian          | 9 <input type="checkbox"/> Sikh           |
| 10 <input type="checkbox"/> Other – which? | 11 <input type="checkbox"/> Prefer not to say |   |