

1 The Heritage Cult

Religion currently figures within heritage preservation history, discourse, and practice primarily through the interrelated ideas of a “heritagization of the sacred” and a “sacralization of heritage,” two ways in which heritage and religion have been made to converge. However, scholars in critical heritage studies have argued that the institutionalized heritage discourse that forms the backbone of contemporary studies in heritage and preservation does not adequately represent or incorporate religious discourse, traditions, or stewardship (Karlström, 2013; Byrne, 2014). The use of outstanding or universal heritage value as a neutral arbiter in conflicting interpretations and management strategies for historic sites of religious nature further complicates, rather than resolves, these tensions.

Advocates for a critical turn in heritage studies have discussed extensively the ways in which practices of preservation are rooted in Western ideologies of objectification and rationalism based on secular values (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013; Byrne, 2014; Rico, 2019). Operationally, global heritage institutions such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and its supporting organizations have recognized to some extent the difficulty of representing religious traditions in their work (Bumbaru, 2008). Some anthropologists have deemed the challenge so insurmountable that they have called for the exclusion of “the spirits” from heritage programs (Berliner, 2013). Such a view echoes earlier calls to delegitimize studies of heritage that center on “the intangible” (Baillie and Chippindale, 2007).

This Element confronts religion as an outcast in heritage studies, examining what Anna Karlström calls a “structural problem” (2013) within heritage discourse. Ubiquitous in the history of heritage and its preservation across the world, this problem has produced tensions and conflicts surrounding the aims of preservation as they relate to the integrity and well-being of religious practices, ultimately stymieing the field’s ability to engage productively with religious discourses. Thus far, the examination of religion has had a privileged but restricted place in the historiography of heritage and preservation studies. It is mobilized most visibly and intentionally in debates that seek to make sense of the dialogics of preservation and destruction (Schildgen, 2008; Harrison, 2013), signaling a dominant positioning of religion within the context of a conflict of values. However, in other disciplinary debates that address the same ontological encounters, the theme of coexistence is elaborated along a heritage of tolerance (Bigelow, 2010: 5), underscoring instead the political choreographies that activate conflict and coexistence around sacred sites (Barkan and Barkey, 2015). While anthropologists Christophe Brumann and David Berliner

conceptualize a heritage that “often serves to render harmless the potentially disruptive nature of religious sites” (2016: 25), scholars of religion seek to better understand the ways in which heritage discourse enforces a reclassification of religious value that allows secular – and, therefore, contested – governance (e.g. Rots, 2019). These diametrically opposed views raise the question: To what extent does heritage discourse itself propel and weaponize such disagreements? Answering requires historicizing and contextualizing an international heritage discourse that operates as a catalyst for, moderator of, and aggressor in the production of tensions between “heritage values” and “religious values” in different cultural and political contexts.

The tensions surrounding religion and religious sites that feature prominently in heritage and preservation literature include (1) tensions over interpretations and uses of historic resources by different religious traditions and (2) tensions between religious and secular management strategies. In both cases, global heritage discourse (and its experts) appears to overlook its operation as a competing ontological reality. However, a rich debate around the material dimensions of religious practice alludes to the role of heritage discourse and practice in mobilizing processes of sacralization and secularization that confront the legitimate authority of religious objects and performances (Meyer and de Witte, 2013). Through a historical survey, this Element brings to the foreground the forces of secularism attached to global heritage discourses. This Element also discusses the ways in which heritage preservation has mobilized and institutionalized its own sacrality in the search for effective consensus and collaboration. It therefore examines global heritage discourse as a disruptive force in the study and assimilation of a heritage of religion into the tropes of global heritage. By exploring how leading and influential heritage institutions and their instruments engage with religious thought, this Element proposes a much broader framework of examination.

More specifically, this Element positions “heritage and religion” as a historically, politically, and socioculturally contingent relationship. The other related scale embedded in this discussion is the circulation of heritage *as* religion, that is, as a set of ideas and actions that circulate effectively through specific doctrinal documents and forms of expertise. These distinct and deliberate recombinations aim to disrupt “proprietary claims and a relation of encompassment” (Lincoln, 1996: 225), which has seen religious discourse primarily addressed from and translated into a heritage preservation ideology via the field of heritage studies rather than on more ontologically neutral grounds. The goal, in other words, is to address the interrelation of heritage and religion from a more critical and reflexive middle ground. This engagement also recognizes its own destabilizing effects. As in the study of the history of religions, this

ontological encounter sees a subject matter dominated by temporal, contextual, situated, human, and material dimensions (in this case, heritage value) examined in a context that represents itself as eternal, transcendent, spiritual, and divine (cf. Lincoln, 1996).

In the foundational text *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, David Lowenthal (1998) calls attention to the circulation of a pervasive religious analogy that aligns with the operation of heritage preservation as a popular faith. Discursively, he traces the first known use of the term “heritage” in the Western canon to a biblical origin in Psalm 16’s “goodly heritage” (Lowenthal, 1998: xiii), but the modern “cult of heritage,” he writes, is likened by its devotees to a spiritual calling. While his rhetoric denotes a certain bias against religion itself and does not elaborate further on the markers of cultism that would justify this characterization, I would argue that this comparison is not unfounded or isolated. Heritage preservation discourse, in fact, is rife with religious and spiritual metaphors. Discussions about the authenticity of heritage objects as an intangible yet powerful quality are articulated through the appreciation of an “aura” (cf. Benjamin, 1992 [1936]; see Holtorf and Schadla-Hall, 1999). In addition, the conceptualization of the unique and complex network of significance that creates and sustains heritage value is articulated as the existence of a *genius loci*, a “spirit of place” (ICOMOS, 2008a), namely their living, social, and spiritual nature. The cult analogy is common, in large part enabled by the way in which aesthetics and affect are used to win hearts and minds in both religious and preservation discourses (Hall, 2011: 6). In his work from the 1970s, Yi-Fu Tuan (1989) refers to the preservation of historic buildings and the establishment of museums as “the cult of the past” that has little in common with cultural rootedness. More recently, Cristoph Rausch (2017) goes as far as proposing an epiphanic moment for this cult under the auspices of UNESCO: the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia associated with the construction of the Aswan High Dam in Egypt. The rise of the cult, in this sense, aligns with the internationalization of heritage discourse and practice and the widespread acceptance of a universal notion of global heritage (cf. Mesckell, 2018).

The metaphor of heritage preservation as a cult can be traced to earlier writings in the field that use the term with different connotations that are not necessarily implying a small, sinister, or obsessive uncritical belief. Alois Riegl (1982) christened the era of heritage preservation as the rise of a “cult of monuments,” which defined a growing interest in the preservation of artistic and historic monuments in German-speaking Europe at the time. His work was then expanded to examine preservation through the analytical lens of an “age value” in the work of art, a value that produces a quasi-religious experience.

Conservator Matthew Hayes argues that “it is tempting to recognize an evocation of the worship of art so pervasive at the time . . . still, this should not ignore the difficulty of the term *Kultus*, somewhat lost in translation as *The modern cult of monuments*. From the Latin *colere*, the word meant veneration, but also care or cultivation” (2019: 138). Hayes (2019) argues that while *colere* may signify religion and shares the same root as the word “culture,” Riegl often uses the term in less mystical ways to refer to reverence or appreciation. Nevertheless, the call to arms that has since given the heritage and preservation field its spiritual undertones can be related to Riegl’s proposition of age value as an appealing and inclusive category that is “based on emotion rather than intellect” (Lamprakos, 2014: 423).

These tensions between reason and emotion run deep in the historical emergence and contemporary practices of heritage preservation and have an effect on the ability of institutionalized heritage preservation discourses to interact with and encompass religious discourse. It could be argued that the alignment of heritage preservation discourse with discourses of sacrality denies the role of reason in the service of specific agendas. For example, it is a discourse that reinforces the idea that heritage preservationism follows a mode of belief that relies on revealed faith rather than rational proof (Lowenthal, 1998: 2). As such, it strategically empowers the two main types of voices of authority in heritage preservation. For experts, actual or potential “heritage sacredness” codifies a preferential understanding of heritage value that is hard to ascertain without specialized expertise. Other interest groups mobilize sacrality, an elusive quality used to claim exclusive access to property by calling on a type of value that may be secret or intimate and, therefore, impossible to rationalize by said heritage experts (Lowenthal, 1998: 236).

Lowenthal, who is credited as a key analyst of the pillars of heritage preservation thought, puts forth a religious analogy for the purposes of centering heritage discourse along the operation of rationality. His review of the mobilization of presumed heritage sacredness, drawing on Anglo-American and Euro-centered preservation practices and debates, concludes that churches, cathedrals, and religious art were stewarded less as sacred legacies than as objects of national pride and secular profit (Lowenthal, 1998: 61). Some architects and museum scholars might disagree. Drawing on Le Corbusier’s idea of *the ineffable*, that is, the unutterable, contemporary scholars and practitioners in architectural design argue that religious buildings and sacred landscapes “often contribute in critical ways to shaping the larger cultural and urban fabric of contemporary life” (Britton, 2010: 10). Therefore, the concept that architectural and religious experiences share a common language and can enrich each other (Goldberg, 2010) idealizes an approach to the preservation

of heritage resources *as* religious material resources and, certainly, proposes a desirable and attainable overlapping practice. Such a possibility gains momentum in the idea of the museum as sacred space. Architectural critic Paul Goldberger suggests that “we” (presumably, the “West”) have “conflated the aesthetic and the sacred, which is why . . . the art museum seems to have replaced the cathedral” (2010: 6). Gretchen Buggeln suggests that the rational Enlightenment thought that accompanied the rise of eighteenth-century museums navigated the divide between knowledge and faith by appropriating the ritual atmosphere and the language of the sacred to channel a transformative experience for the visitor (2012: 36–37). Deliberately designed to resemble older ceremonial monuments and temples until the mid-twentieth century, the museum can be easily translated into a ritual space that invites ritual performance, a space where religious experiences like revelation, transcendence, and transformation can be enacted secularly (Duncan, 1995: 2, 9, 10). This aligns with the invention of aesthetics as a transference of spiritual values from the sacred realm into secular time and space (Duncan, 1995: 14). The way in which Enlightenment rationality found a surrogate ritual atmosphere in the institution of the museum inspires an examination of the parallel ways in which heritage discourse was crafted to offer a similar ritual surrogate.

1.1 From Cult to Culture

Scholars in the critical turn in heritage studies have been skeptical of the utility of perpetuating the heritage-as-cult analogy, problematizing instead genealogies, agencies, and practices that enable or disable the discourses and forms of authority that can be associated with religious significance. For example, focusing on a *patrimonial regime* as a force of meaning-making, Valdimar Hafstein (2018) asserts that the religious analogy is overblown, favoring instead an analogy with environmental movements. His work seeks to explore more specific ways in which the regime cultivates responsible subjects (Hafstein and Skrydstrup, 2020). Meanwhile, Kathryn Lafrenz Samuels proposes to move the study of heritage “from cult to culture” (2018: 20) in order to bring a spotlight to the *cultural* part of the term “cultural heritage” and, thus, re-center heritage studies within an anthropological tradition. Addressing more specifically the place of a heritage of faith in global heritage, Britta Rudolff refers to the postmodern cult of values as signaling a shift from an objectivist to a subjectivist field that pivots on the fall of authenticity as an absolute standard for preservation (2006: 57, 2010: 72).

These separate yet coherent calls for aligning the study of heritage and preservation to the politics of knowledge production for cultural heritage

represent a promising intervention. They contextualize *heritagization* as a transformation operating within social processes that mobilize sacralization as a political-aesthetic practice (Meyer and de Witte, 2013: 280). Therefore, it is worth preserving the analytical idea of a “heritage cult” for various reasons while also continuing to flesh out how this metaphor can facilitate critical praxis. First, heritage discourse and preservation practices are circulated as a form of religion in the Geertzian sense: a system of symbols that acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations (Geertz, 1966). This is precisely the fundamentalism of heritage preservation, which dictates that all other value hierarchies fold into those of preservationists. Therefore, rather than fetishizing heritage discourse as religious discourse, I consider it theoretically significant to examine further the efficacy with which an international heritage discourse constructs and promotes a set of *beliefs* in heritage preservation while at the same time undermining other beliefs. Second, the rationalist and secularist model that dominates global heritage discourse needs to be understood in strict relation to its practical contexts and authorized disciplinary readings that construct these categories (Asad, 1993). The secular, in this discussion, is not indicative of an absence of “religion.” It displaces one sensory and emotional repertoire by another (Jager, 2015). Examining the methodological approaches that have encouraged reconciliation with religious traditions, I will further argue that the apparent exclusion of religious thought in heritage preservation is neither unconditional nor comprehensive. Global heritage and preservation discourse sometimes permits certain sacred traditions and rituals to take place and even thrive (cf. Bowman, 2012: 5).

Supported by the promising contribution of anthropological methods to heritage and preservation studies, two disciplinary turns encourage a reconsideration of the place of religiosity in the history and practices associated with heritage discourse. One is the “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences that brings about a reappraisal and critical analysis of matter and materiality in the study of religion (Meyer and Houtman, 2012). This turn challenges the utility of categories of analysis such as “belief” and “religion” as largely Protestant legacies that should be reexamined within the interrelated conditions that shape religious practice. Accordingly, Section 2 reviews the ways in which these same legacies shaped the emergence of the Western canon for heritage discourse in alignment with long processes of secularization. This historical overview begins with the European wars of religion in the sixteenth century and proceeds through the emergence of global and institutional heritage discourse and its preservation ethos in the twentieth century. An eventual confrontation with “the spiritual” via recognition of alternative heritage

practices that preexist or coexist with or resist Western heritage preservation gives rise to an academic and institutional redirection at the turn of the millennium when religion becomes a subject of dedicated institutional and disciplinary initiatives. What David Chidester has termed the “new materialism” in the study of religion redirects the focus of analysis to an examination of socially shared, authorized discourses that separate the material and the immaterial (Chidester, 2018). Likewise, the critical turn in heritage studies, concerned with the effects of a dominant global heritage discourse, constitutes the second disciplinary turn that provides a fertile ground for the study of the artifacts and effects of secularization on heritage discourse and practice.

In Section 3, I discuss the different *zeitgeists* through which spirituality and its exclusion have been confronted in the more recent history of the field through case studies that now form the backbone of a critical heritage tradition. The fact that universal heritage ideals continue to be summoned to mediate more recent preservation challenges in shifting religious contexts, such as the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan or the conversion of the Hagia Sophia in Turkey into a functioning mosque, suggests that the anti-hegemonic heritage discourse that defines the critical turn fails to engage with its secularizing specters. The rematerialization of the study of religion (Meyer, Morgan, Paine, and Plate, 2010) and the spiritualization of the study of heritage invite an examination of heritage preservation practices in the context of different religious traditions but with particular emphasis on the frontiers at which competing semiotics coexist and are negotiated, and sometimes disrupted, by heritage preservation traditions (cf. Keane, 2018).

Section 4 offers a more equitable way forward. To begin, the section considers the recent practice of retrofitting heritage studies with a concern for religious values, which I argue to be inadequate for addressing the asymmetric encounter between religion and heritage traditions. I propose instead a critical and responsible reexamination of the disruptive nature of heritage and preservation discourses, the channels of expertise, and epistemological approaches that define much of the mission for critical heritage studies. In this concluding section, I propose a reflexive study of heritage and religion that supports a post-secular transformation in the discipline of heritage studies that is attentive to agency, ingenuity, and strategy.

For the purposes of this Element, I use the term “religion” pragmatically with a focus on establishing the contours of the debate rather than on proposing a definable category (de Vries, 2008). This means, for example, that I do not search for a distinction between the treatment of orthodox, institutional, and text-based religious practices and the beliefs and practices of “popular religions” that are particularly marginalized in global heritage preservation

practices and discourses (Byrne, 2014). Likewise, throughout different sections of this discussion, I use the terms “religion” as an aggregate that encompasses “religion,” “belief,” “faith,” and “sacrality.” While such simplification may be sacrilegious in religious studies, these terms are used loosely by different authors and institutions across heritage preservation debates and policies, not least due to the claim that cultural heritage encompasses all dimensions. It therefore seems counterproductive to attempt to hierarchize such a heterogeneous terminology from the perspective of a field that has, as I argue throughout this Element, engaged very little with the subject matter of religion. In fact, I would argue that preserving the uses of terms like “religion,” “belief,” “faith,” and “sacrality” in their discursive context reflects the fragmented way in which studies and policies for heritage preservation have approached and appropriated different aspects of religion.

For example, Britta Rudolff (2006, 2010) prefers to refer to a “heritage of faith” that stands for a representation of narratives inspired by faith. When examining global rapprochement efforts between heritage preservation and religion, Herb Stovel (2008) frames his arguments around a “sacred heritage,” that is, a heritage whose principal source of meaning is faith. A contemporary UNESCO working group on religion defines heritage of religion sites as those that “possess components of religious significance and are recognized as holy cities by different communities” (UNESCO, 2010). At the same time, the “Filling the Gaps” initiative of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) articulates “religious property” as “any form of property with religious or spiritual associations” (ICOMOS, 2004). Meanwhile, Britta Rudolff suggests that a heritage of faith is a “seemingly illegitimate category” after observing the ways in which religious buildings are grouped as historic buildings, while the intangible heritage of faith can simply be categorized as a dance or a festive event (2006: 77).

Conversely, distinct terms like “the secular,” “secularization,” and “secularism” have no significant footprint in the heritage literature. Benedict Anderson argued that the construction of imagined communities requires grounding on a secular and homogeneous time as well as on the constructed images that mediate that imagination (Anderson, 1983; de Vries, 2001). This Element considers that one such mediator, cultural heritage and its preservation, is produced by secularist ideologies that exclude religious experiences and authorities but not one that negates the existence of religious doctrine, institutions, or bodies. The exclusion of faith as epistemology does not erase sacrality in heritage value; rather, it subdues sacred narratives and authorities in heritage preservation discourses and practices. There is tension between the clear recognition of religious thought as a constituent of the places and traditions that form

part of the assemblage of global heritage industries and the discomfort with religious thought in contemporary interpretations and uses of heritage. What is needed is an intentional and reflexive acknowledgment of these tensions to chart the future of critical studies of heritage.

2 Pressures of Secularism

The ways in which practices of heritage preservation are shaped by specific spiritual and religious discourses have been addressed partially in the literature of heritage studies. This literature also reflects on the evolution of secular cultural industries that closely shadow the advent of modernity (e.g. Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013). While the story of the origins of a global heritage discourse is often located in mid-twentieth-century cosmopolitan engagements of UNESCO, the roots of a heritage preservation ideology extend back to the nineteenth century when the preservation of heritage became a formative instrument in nation-building projects across Europe.

Some scholars, however, recognize an earlier formative period that gives shape to heritage discourse in European territories: the secularization of religious spaces and performances that resulted from the European wars of religion from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries. For example, historicizing Western heritage thought, David Lowenthal summarizes the ways in which heritage value as an object of study was shaped by the rise of secularism starting in the Reformation in the sixteenth century. Here, he highlights the emergence of the idea of a posthumous human legacy that was disrupted in favor of secular and materialistic practices of remembrance. This shift saw ideological resistance to the Catholic Church manifested in a worldview that differentiated and compartmentalized distinct spheres of science and religion, a European secular rationalism that would eventually provide a foundation for the emergence of archaeological and heritage discourses (Byrne, 2014: 6). Denis Byrne calls the period that follows a “history of disenchantment.” The dramatic changes brought about by the Protestant Reformation affected attitudes to places and objects by eradicating, marginalizing, and controlling the spiritual topography of Europe (Byrne, 2014: 40–43). Byrne describes how, while the doctrine of medieval Christianity had recognized, assimilated, and, to some degree, used pagan sacred landscapes and relics, the Reformation offered a doctrine and practice of worship disconnected from “spiritual” objects and places. The material culture of Christianity was rendered irrelevant by the internalization of worship, which, in turn, made embodied practices such as the pilgrimage and the spiritual glorification of the art and architecture of churches ancillary. The sixteenth-century Reformation also spelled neglect and destruction for the built

landscape. The very fabric of Christianity was problematic for its embodiment of medieval Christian beliefs, and this resulted in processes of erasure such as the demolition of medieval abbeys in Britain (Aston, 1973).

The Catholic Counter-Reformation that followed brought about a spiritual revival in relationships and experiences of the landscape. During the European expansion of the sixteenth century, this ontology was productive for the assimilation of new indigenous religious landscapes, leading, for example, to the superimposition of Christianity on native sacred sites in the Americas. Later, through the European Baroque period, this type of transformation extended to sites that were not explicitly religious, including “islands, ruins, grottoes, androgynous bodies, and places of execution” (Eade, 2009: 241, quoted in Byrne, 2014: 46). Changes in spirituality and religious ideology, for example, manifested in Baroque overlays in Romanesque churches, whose interiors were dramatically reworked in ways that would constitute destruction by the standards of a modern preservation ideology (Schildgen, 2008: 15). The pressures of modern preservation standards on the dynamic liturgical needs of religion were not yet on the horizon. However, during this time, the field of archaeology emerged in line with the study of natural history as a mode of inquiry that centers on the systematic description of visually observable attributes (Schnapp, 1996: 205–212). A focus on new modes of documenting, ordering, and collecting produced a topography of secular “sites of significance” that would become heritage assemblages rooted in a rationalist modernity (Byrne, 2014: 45). The emergence of a “public sphere” in the seventeenth century and the rise of antiquarianism further enabled early processes of “heritagization” and turned such sites into historical monuments. Through these transformations, new forms of knowledge that derive from art historical and archaeological expertise and disciplinary languages emerged (Jokilehto, 2012). New disciplines were dominated by textual and two-dimensional pictorial representations that could be circulated and indexed. These shifts set the ground for the emergence of a field dedicated to the study and preservation of heritage significance that is centered in specific curatorial practices. The study of heritage was thus defined by a heavy reliance on measurement and precision, a dominant concern with the visual and tangible aspects of surfaces (Byrne, 2007), the establishment of listing and hierarchizing apparatuses (Rico, 2015; Harrison, 2016), and an emphasis on visual technologies of capture and representation (Shanks and Svabo, 2013; Hamilakis and Ifantidis, 2015; Brusius, 2016).

Through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, interest in recovery and preservation was on the rise. This was partly a reaction to the decay of cultural wealth in Europe (Mrijnissen, 2015: 278), an idea of aesthetics that separated