

# Moral Management and Secularized Religious Heritage in the Netherlands

## The Case of the Utrecht Saint Martin Celebrations

*Welmoed Fenna Wagenaar*

### Introduction

Every year, on the Saturday evening before 11 November, the center of the Dutch city of Utrecht provides the stage for a spectacle of moving light sculptures, music, and performance art. Over the course of two hours, thousands of people watch or walk along in the participatory Saint Martin Parade, bringing paper lanterns or other light sources with them. Little children look around in wonder as local communities carry light sculptures or wear costumes made from white rice paper and willow branches, forming abstract representations of animals, human-shaped figures, and a wide range of objects, all illuminating the medieval city streets. Along the route, the sounds of brass bands, choirs, and church bells ring. So-called beggar clowns play their part being “alone,” “sick,” or “homeless,” made explicit via signs carried around their necks. There is a lot to see, but the true eye-catcher is the light sculpture of a figure on horseback, about four meters tall, raised high above the public (see figure 10.1). Used since the parade’s first edition in 2011, the sculpture depicts a young Martin during his time in the Roman army. Although abstract like the other sculptures, he visibly wears a plain helmet and the cloak he famously gave away to a beggar at the city gates of the French town of Amiens.

The Saint Martin Parade is the ritual highlight of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations, an annual event dedicated to the city’s patron saint, Saint Martin of Tours. Over the past twenty years, Utrecht’s celebration of Saint



**Figure 10.1.** The light sculpture of Saint Martin, just before passing the cathedral Dom Tower in Utrecht, 2018. © Welmoed Fenna Wagenaar.

Martin's Day has changed significantly. As in other places in the Netherlands where Saint Martin is celebrated,<sup>1</sup> Utrecht's Saint Martin feast had been primarily an evening of excitement for young children; comparable to Halloween, the Dutch Saint Martin tradition consists of kids going door-to-door on the evening of Saint Martin's Day, carrying paper lanterns and singing Saint Martin songs in exchange for candy or fruit. In Utrecht, however, this generally localized ritual practice transformed and expanded into a week-long, citywide event called the Feast of Sharing. Taking place in the days

leading up to 11 November, the Feast of Sharing is composed of a variety of rituals and practices that exhibit a local identity of inclusiveness and charity. In addition to the still-existing lantern walking of children, festivities include guided Saint Martin tours, lantern and musical workshops, theatrical performances and storytelling events, concerts, dialogue sessions, lectures, solidarity awards, a debate competition for schoolchildren, a meal for the homeless, a collection campaign for local food banks, the ringing of the Martin bell in the famous Dom Tower, and the Saint Martin Parade with its spectacular, festival-like opening, the Fire of Saint Martin.

In 2012, the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations became inscribed on the UNESCO-associated Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands, thus being officially recognized as cultural heritage. The appreciation of the Saint Martin feast as cultural heritage fits a broader trend in Europe in which religious objects, practices, and places are attributed specific historical, cultural, and identity value as heritage. With regard to Saint Martin for example, there have been parallel instances of renewed interest in the feast both in the Netherlands and in Europe at large, resulting among other things in a Dutch Saint Martin Network (since 2018) and the European Réseau Européen des Centres Culturels Saint Martin, formed in 2012 to bring European Saint Martin cities together to exchange ideas on how to safeguard the heritage of Saint Martin. An ethnographic analysis of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations provides insight into what these processes of heritagization entail locally and how religious components and histories may play a role in it.<sup>2</sup>

In this chapter, I demonstrate the significance of the management involved in making a celebration like Saint Martin be recognized and appreciated as heritage. The case of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations presents remarkable developments with regard to religious heritage management. Although the Saint Martin feast originated as a Catholic name day celebration, it has long since lost its religious character in the Netherlands; religious elements are (and have been for a long time) absent from the secularized Dutch Saint Martin tradition. It is striking, therefore, that religion turned out to be an important issue in the management of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations, its position being a topic of ongoing concern to the feast's key stakeholders. How is it that religious connotations surrounding Saint Martin—connotations long gone in the Netherlands—have re-emerged as relevant factors in the management of the feast as heritage? How can we understand religion's surprising reappearance on the (back)stage? Who are the key players and what are the contexts that shape the management practices with regard to Saint Martin's, apparently sticky, Christian provenance?

Using the notions of the culturalization of citizenship (Duyvendak et al. 2016) and sacralization of heritage (Meyer and de Witte 2013), I first paint a picture of the current Dutch heritage landscape. I show how, in the Nether-

lands, religious rituals and celebrations have been lifted up and set apart as symbols of national identity and how because of that they have increasingly become part of public contestations. This contextualizes the specific ways in which stakeholders have revitalized Utrecht's Saint Martin tradition and manage the meanings surrounding Saint Martin. Specifically, I argue that as a result of interactions with broader heritage regimes and politics, religious interpretations and symbols get "veiled" in the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations. This "veiling" should be understood metaphorically, in that religion is relegated to the background, to establish a secularized frame of inclusive universality that has contributed to and upholds Saint Martin's status as cultural heritage. Before turning to this, however, let us briefly take a look at Saint Martin's historical background.

### Saint Martin's Day

Saint Martin of Tours (c. 316–397) is a Christian saint who was widely worshipped in Europe during the early and High Middle Ages. He is likely best known for the legend of him giving away half his cloak to a beggar in front of the city gates of Amiens, when he was stationed there as a young soldier of the Roman army. According to Saint Martin's hagiography *Vita sancti Martini*, written by his contemporary Sulpicius Severus, Jesus revealed himself to Martin in a dream the night after this act of charity, wearing the half-cloak Martin had given away. As a result of this experience, the young Martin had himself baptized and left the army. The story goes that in the years that followed he traveled through Europe to convert people to Christianity and destroy pagan temples and imagery. After a while, he settled as a monk in the area of Poitiers, established several monasteries, and became bishop of Tours around 370, which he would remain until his death on 8 November 397. His name day would be celebrated for centuries to come in various European countries on or around the date of his burial, 11 November.

Saint Martin's charitable practices and humble nature made him a symbol of Christian virtue and earned him, among other titles, the title of patron saint of the poor. As a result, Saint Martin celebrations were popular among the people and have always involved (symbolic) elements of generosity. Next to masses and processions, medieval Saint Martin feasts involved the poor going door-to-door to collect alms. There were also rites related to the change of seasons, such as bonfires, market fairs, and the first slaughter. Nowadays, European Saint Martin celebrations may still entail forms of these earlier rituals. Depending on local tradition and interpretation, church services,<sup>3</sup> bonfires, market fairs, processions, and lantern walking (derived from the practice of collecting alms) may be part of Saint Martin's Day (Nis-

sen and Rose 1997: 22–23). In countries such as Denmark and Germany, “Saint Martin’s goose” is part of festive Saint Martin menus, based on the legend of Saint Martin hiding among geese to avoid his appointment as bishop (Lauvrijs 2004: 262).

The lantern walking, lantern processions, and bonfires became typical of the Dutch Saint Martin tradition. Moreover, the celebration of Saint Martin as Catholic name day gradually made way for a notion of Saint Martin’s Day as an innocent children’s feast. In 2007, ethnologist John Helsloot concluded that in the Netherlands, Saint Martin is mostly meant to “give children a couple of exciting hours, with the chance to obtain a lot of candy.” The feast “does no longer seem to be ideologically colored,” he adds, apart from some “general references to the symbolic of light and darkness” and “a call to forms of charity here and there.”<sup>4</sup>

## The Culturalization of Religious Feasts in the Netherlands

Almost fifteen years after Helsloot’s statements, it seems as if some things are changing. The interest in Saint Martin’s Day as an authentic, “truly Dutch” tradition—often contrasted with Halloween, celebrated just short of two weeks earlier but still relatively new in the Netherlands—has increased. The official heritage status of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations forms the strongest evidence of this. It indicates that Saint Martin has become more than “just” an innocent children’s feast, which is a development that does not stand on its own nor is it ideologically void.

In the Netherlands, similar to the popular Sinterklaas (or Saint Nicholas) feast, the religious character of Saint Martin early on made way for an interpretation of the feast as essentially non-confessional (Balkenhol and van den Hemel 2018: 9–10; Boer 2009). During the Reformation, Protestant ministers sought to bring a halt to all Catholic celebrations but failed miserably in their attempts, as popular feasts continued to be celebrated among the common people. The Saint Martin feast was one of them, its denominational character quickly fading in exchange for a notion of Saint Martin as a feast of the poor. Like Saint Nicholas, Saint Martin came to be understood as a “saint of the people” (*volksheilige*) rather than a Catholic figure (Helsloot 2001: 508). In the first decades of the twentieth century, folklorists used this status to fully redefine Saint Martin as part of Dutch folklore. Saint Martin songs and the lantern walking, preferably with hollowed beets instead of paper lanterns, were viewed as authentic folk practices that had nothing to do with religion, being meaningful and worthy of respect because of their long history (503).

Parallel to the folklorization of feasts like Saint Martin, cultural elements increasingly became symbolic of national identity after World War II. This

process has been described by sociologist Jan Willem Duyvendak and associates as the “culturalization of citizenship”: citizenship has become less understood in terms of political and social rights and more as being about cultural norms, values, and practices (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016: 2). This reinforced the ability of ritual practices and holidays to become powerful tools for establishing group identity and defining the boundaries of said group (Stengs 2012: 11–13). In the Netherlands, for example, culturalization becomes apparent in how religious holidays like Christmas and Easter are lifted up as “(Judeo-)Christian heritage,” obtaining special status as foundations of Dutch society. Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte refer to such processes as the “sacralization” of heritage (Meyer and de Witte 2013), pointing to the ways in which heritage formations can transform religious sacrality into secular sacrality.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the culturalization of citizenship and religion, the Netherlands sees a broadly shared sense of protectiveness toward Christian holidays as well as a growing anxiety about people no longer knowing their “true meanings” (a development that spurred the Dutch HERILIGION research program). Moreover, religious rituals of any denomination have become central to the debate on social integration (see, e.g., Balkenhol 2015; Stengs 2012; van den Hemel 2017). Due to the increased uncertainty about who or what constitutes a society—due to the arrival of immigrants, for example—cultural practices have become claimed as heritage and are not seldomly mobilized to draw boundaries between cultural selves and others. The case of the heritagization of the Sinterklaas feast, admitted to the Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage as reaction to the backlash on the feast’s controversial Black Pete figure, is an example (Stengs 2018: 8–9).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the religious character of Saint Martin’s Day disappeared early on in exchange for a view of Saint Martin as Dutch folk practice and—as of recently—cultural heritage. Crucially, the management of Saint Martin as heritage should be understood within the context of this folklorization and culturalization in the Netherlands. Saint Martin celebrations belong to and need to position themselves within a society where religious feasts and holidays have become increasingly controversial and where celebrations with a Christian history have become part of exclusionary, nationalist discourses. Inevitably, this has shaped the heritagization of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations and the ways its custodians manage its meanings.

## **The Heritagization of the Utrecht Saint Martin Celebrations**

Due to Saint Martin’s travels and his role as patron saint of the Franks, many villages, monasteries, and churches in Europe have been named after him

or have him as their patron saint. This includes the Dutch city of Utrecht. Utrecht was historically the bishop's town of the Lower Countries, its main church being the thirteenth-century Gothic Saint Martin's Cathedral, also known as the Dom Church. References to Saint Martin can be found throughout the city; there are statues and depictions on buildings, and the colors of the city's flag and football club (red diagonally on white) refer to the saint's tunic and cloak. The city is also home to several Saint Martin relics, currently on display in Museum Catharijneconvent, the national museum for the art, history, and culture of Christianity in the Netherlands. However, despite how much Saint Martin is ingrained in Utrecht, for a long time the city's Saint Martin celebrations were no different from those in other places in the Netherlands familiar with the tradition. In some neighborhoods, children would go door-to-door with paper lanterns or walk in small processions, but these activities remained localized and depended on if something was organized by local churches, schools, or parents.

This started to change in 2001, with the arrival of a working group called the Saint Martin's Assembly.<sup>7</sup> The assembly started organizing special Saint Martin events, such as the raising of a Saint Martin city flag by the city's mayor and schoolchildren on 11 November, and it began promoting Saint Martin activities that still existed in the city. The assembly also approached other organizations to join the celebrations and develop their own activities. Slowly but surely, different parties picked up on the feast, including two music centers that organized a small parade in one of the city's districts in 2007.<sup>8</sup> This event formed the basis of the Saint Martin Parade as the city now knows it. In 2011, a broad range of city institutions—cultural institutions, the municipality of Utrecht, various museums, the Utrecht Archives, and the Saint Martin's Assembly—cooperated in organizing the parade's first official edition. In the years that followed, the Saint Martin Parade grew in prominence and turned the Saint Martin celebrations into a central event on the city's annual festivities calendar,<sup>9</sup> exemplifying ritual's inclination to magnify and multiply and make something the topic of special attention (Stengs 2018: 17).

In light of these developments, the Saint Martin's Assembly managed to successfully admit the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations to the Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Netherlands in 2012. The Inventory is a list of cultural practices, rituals, and events, each of which has been applied for admission by its own practitioners together with a safeguarding plan. Whether a practice becomes (and remains) listed is decided by the Dutch Centre for Intangible Cultural Heritage (Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland [KIEN]), the organization that by order of the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science is responsible for putting into practice the 2012 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In other words, the KIEN coordinates on a national level the composition of

the Inventory and monitors the safeguarding of the listed heritage, the actual safeguarding being done by the heritage communities themselves. In practice this task is often taken up by specific individuals (Köbben 1983), which in the case of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations are the people behind the Saint Martin's Assembly. The assembly is therefore the official custodian of the heritage titled "Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations."

Although the admission of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations to the Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage does not seem to have had a direct effect on people's perception of the feast (i.e., apart from the assembly and its closest partners, no one I spoke to brought up its official status as cultural heritage on their own), the admission does inevitably link the celebrations to existing heritage regimes. That is, its heritagization takes place in interaction with a framework of specific registers, vocabularies, and discursive rules (Bendix 2009; Bendix, Eggert, and Peselmann 2013; Van de Port and Meyer 2018: 12). As the editors point out in the introduction to this volume, this may also result in stakeholders having to translate various aspects of a heritage into terms of their value for broader societal or even global frameworks. As I will show, the Saint Martin's Assembly and its closest partners continually engage with heritage regimes and cultural politics in their management of what the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations (are supposed to) mean. What is more, in the management of the meanings surrounding Saint Martin, religion makes a comeback.

## **Saint Martin's Assembly and the "Reinvention" of a Heritage**

As the above paragraph has shown, the Saint Martin's Assembly has been crucial to the transformation of Utrecht's Saint Martin feast and is a key stakeholder in its management. The assembly was founded by a Catholic pastoral worker, Chris van Deventer (1938–2016), with the aim to "stimulate, enthuse and coordinate" Saint Martin practices in the city of Utrecht so as to "bring the century-old tradition of Saint Martin back to public life."<sup>10</sup> Despite van Deventer's Catholic background and the personal, religious connection he felt to Saint Martin, his attempt to bring back to life the Saint Martin tradition was focused on what the assembly views as the "cultural side" of the Saint Martin celebrations: those elements that twentieth-century folklorists designated as authentic folk practices. According to van Deventer, Saint Martin had lost its meaning in Utrecht because the majority of inhabitants no longer knew who Saint Martin was. It was his conviction that cultural practices like lantern walking and singing Saint Martin songs would hold the most power to breathe new life into the feast and keep the memory of Saint Martin alive.



In other words, an important reason why the Saint Martin's Assembly was founded was to ensure people would not forget about Saint Martin, making this case an example of the aforementioned anxiety surrounding the lack of knowledge about Christian holidays in the Netherlands.<sup>11</sup> Even so, van Deventer's anxiety did not result in an attempt to claim Saint Martin for a particular kind of people or strictly preserve its current form. As van Deventer passed away in 2016, I spoke to a friend of his about the early motivations and goals of the assembly. This friend, Rien Sprenger, is now one of the key members of the assembly and has been an essential figure in the organization of especially the first editions of the Saint Martin Parade. Sprenger told me that the assembly deliberately set out to "reinvent the tradition" (using this exact English terminology) of Saint Martin, which he explained as the current celebrations "drawing on what was and adjusting it to what has changed and giving new meaning to it again." Take the mission statement of the assembly:

The goal is to preserve the tradition and philosophy [*gedachtegoed*] of Saint Martin and translate them to contemporary, modern society. . . . [The Saint Martin's Assembly Utrecht] translates the philosophy of Saint Martin, sharing the cloak, to social and cultural goals: sharing together in solidarity and peace. [The assembly] wants to broaden and renew the tradition and practices surrounding Saint Martin and deploy them as unifying element in modern, pluriform society.<sup>12</sup>

For the Saint Martin's Assembly, preservation of the tradition and ideas of Saint Martin go hand in hand with "translating," "broadening," and "renewing" the practices surrounding Saint Martin to "modern, pluriform" society. Similar sentiments are expressed by one of the assembly's closest partners, the Sharing Arts Society (SAS). Since 2014, this community art center has taken most of the responsibility in organizing the Saint Martin Parade under the artistic leadership of theater-maker Paul Feld. Their website reads:

The Saint Martin Parade is formed by a multicolored network of participating organizations and initiatives from all districts of the city that grows each edition. . . . This deliberately includes locations for refugee reception (asylum centers), homeless people, care homes, and schools for mentally and physically disabled children. Saint Martin is a powerful plea for a society that no one gets excluded from. It is a Feast of Sharing, a feast of the whole city, with all its cultures, generations, and differences.<sup>13</sup>

In reinventing the Saint Martin celebrations, the Saint Martin's Assembly and the SAS have put forward an interpretation of Saint Martin as an inclusive and diverse heritage for all. This move was more than just a "reinvention." It has been part of a careful navigation of existing heritage regimes and politics. Saint Martin is explicitly framed in terms of broad societal value that speaks to a diverse public, making the exact kind of translation referred to in

the introduction to this volume. Most notably, the presentation of a fiercely inclusive narrative surrounding the heritage of Saint Martin has become a way for the assembly and the SAS to react to cultural politics surrounding religious feasts and holidays. The Sinterklaas feast in particular, and how particular groups lay claim to it due to the Black Pete controversy, was often brought up in conversations as an example of what Saint Martin should *not* become. In addition, the overall openness toward contemporary renewal, as found in both quotes, is one of the requirements for admission to the Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage; the KIEN states that heritage should be “dynamic, meaning that it may change with time” and that custodians need to be “open to these dynamics and express this accordingly.”<sup>14</sup>

The quotes above also show something else. In presenting Saint Martin as a heritage for all, the notion of “Feast of Sharing” is essential. In their attempt to (in Sprenger’s words) “expand” and “broaden” the feast, the Saint Martin’s Assembly focuses on what they understand to be the “essence” of Saint Martin and the foundation of his heritage. This essence, which can be considered the sacred core of the celebrations, is the moral value of sharing, as materialized in Saint Martin’s act of sharing his cloak. Interestingly, this turns the spotlight on the ideological or moral component of Saint Martin that Helsloot back in 2007 noted was only “here and there” present: the call to charity and solidarity. This provides a stark contrast to previous decades and is, I believe, the reason why religion has reared its head in how the assembly manages the Saint Martin celebrations.

## **Sacralizing a Moral Framework and Confronting the Burden of Religious Heritage**

The focus on Saint Martin’s morality has contributed significantly to the appreciation and expansion of the feast. By emphasizing the value of sharing instead of letting the celebration of Saint Martin be “just” about children walking with lanterns for candy, the Saint Martin’s Assembly has managed to present the feast as something that is not only meaningful because of its long history, but also because of its relevance to a society having to deal with issues like social isolation, integration, and economic inequality. As historian Willem Frijhoff points out, when heritage comes with a narrative that makes it meaningful for contemporary and future life, then people are able to identify with it and accept it as authentic heritage (Frijhoff 2011: 39). The same goes for the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations. Many people attending (parts of) the celebrations told me that they appreciate the Saint Martin feast because it “brings the whole city together” and it “is really about something.” Emphasizing the value of sharing has also opened the feast up to a

wide range of stakeholders; as long as organizations or institutions manage to link their activities to this theme, the activities can become part of the Feast of Sharing and are taken up in its promotion. Whether an activity fits the theme is decided upon by the assembly. This not only makes them the architects of the renewed Saint Martin tradition, but also turns them into the gatekeeper of what the heritage of Saint Martin is supposed to stand for: the moral value of sharing, relatable to anyone from any background.

However, the renewed focus on the person of Saint Martin and the value of sharing has also resulted in something else: it centers a moral framework that increases the possibility of foregrounding the religious components that the Saint Martin tradition lost. Saint Martin's act of sharing his cloak can easily be interpreted as it was originally, namely as an act of Christian virtue. And Saint Martin himself remains a Christian saint who, according to his hagiography, had always been interested in Christianity, who approached others like one would Jesus Christ, who had an encounter with Jesus, and who traveled through Europe to convert pagans and dismantle their places of worship.

It is these Christian interpretations and elements of Saint Martin's heritage that both Sprenger and Feld referred to as an "obstacle" or "restriction" during interviews. This may seem odd in a context where Christian feasts are increasingly *appreciated* as Dutch national heritage, but if we take into consideration the goals of the Saint Martin's Assembly (i.e., to reinvent Saint Martin to be an inclusive heritage for all), the apprehension toward overtly visible religious elements and interpretations makes sense. First, the assembly and the SAS are afraid that Christian elements risk ostracizing nonreligious or non-Christian people. Dutch society is one of the most secularized societies in the world. Since the 1950s, there has been a steady decline of organized religion, with only 49 percent of the Dutch population today saying they belong to a religious group (including religions other than Christianity, like Islam) and just under one in six people attending religious services with regularity.<sup>15</sup> Part of this development has also been that a generation of people—particularly baby boomers, many of whom experienced the obligatory church attendance as a burden—understand "religion" to be institutional, dogmatic, moralistic, and restrictive. It has also led to the viewpoint that religion is, or at the very least has a serious inclination to be, exclusionary. This broadly shared Dutch conception of religion shapes the assembly's and the SAS's view on the matter. Sprenger explained, "If possible, then in this time and age, the patron should not only be there for a minority—namely those who go to church—but if possible, he should still and again be there for and belong to everyone." Religion understood in these ways works against the aim to turn Saint Martin into a heritage for all, which is why religious interpretations and elements become a potential risk.

Second, religious elements may also become a problem when obtaining funding. The Saint Martin's Assembly and its partners, the Sharing Arts Society especially, are dependent on subsidies obtained from institutions such as the municipality of Utrecht, the Dutch Cultural Participation Fund (Fonds voor Cultuurparticipatie), and local funding associations. To receive funding from these parties requires that events be accessible to a broad public or pay attention to cultural diversity. Religious activities, from the viewpoint that religion is exclusive and restrictive, do not match this criterion. Moreover, as religion is often equated with institutional religion, state-related institutions generally do not support religious activities, on the premise that it goes against the Dutch separation of church and state. This shapes what I call a "politics of funding": in order to receive money, stakeholders have to play it smart, in this case when it comes to the topic of religion. In other words, in order to obtain funding, the assembly and the SAS have to manage and contain the danger of being associated with or understood as (Christian) religious practice.

Paradoxically, this means that because of the emphasis on the figure of Saint Martin and his morality, religion—understood in the sense of institutional, non-culturalized Christianity—has returned through the back door, finding its way back into the Saint Martin celebrations *within* the management of stakeholders like the SAS and the assembly. In order to safeguard the broad societal relevance and financial resources of the feast, these stakeholders have to navigate existing viewpoints and criteria surrounding religion and the meanings Saint Martin may have. The last sections of this chapter analyze in detail how the assembly and the SAS do this. To this aim, I will zoom in on the management strategy with regard to Saint Martin's religious provenance and show how in the process of establishing the moral framework of sharing, religion becomes "veiled" in favor of a secularized gaze of universality.

## **Managing Meaning, Veiling Religion**

In 2015, the Saint Martin's Assembly entered into an official partnership with not just the Sharing Arts Society, but also Museum Catharijneconvent, the aforementioned Dutch national museum for Christian heritage. As a national museum, Museum Catharijneconvent is a secular institution that aims to "safeguard, share, and extend the knowledge about Christian heritage."<sup>16</sup> As mentioned previously, the museum has several Saint Martin relics on display: a piece of Saint Martin's skull in a modern relic holder and the Hammer of Saint Martin, a secondary relic said to have been the object used by Saint Martin in his quest to destroy pagan places and objects of worship. According to the museum, the relics belong to the city and its people and form a

valuable medium through which people can be taught about the history of Saint Martin. Therefore, they suggested them to be carried around or be otherwise included in the Saint Martin Parade.

Whereas one might expect the assembly and the SAS to be immediately enthusiastic about the museum's proposal, they turned out to be rather apprehensive. Of course, there were practical concerns: Is it worthwhile to incorporate such objects if you have to take extra precautions for them to be safe and visible? What to do with the Hammer of Saint Martin, which is too fragile to be carried around? However, there were also other considerations at play. Sprenger explained to me that the Saint Martin Parade is not meant to be a religious procession and that carrying relics is not the parade's purpose. Furthermore, he expressed concern that an openly Catholic practice within the parade might lead to "controversy"—a reference to the aforementioned worry surrounding the supposed exclusionary dimensions of religion.<sup>17</sup> In other words, the apprehension toward incorporating the relics was at least partly grounded in the explicitly Christian associations these objects might evoke.

During my fieldwork, I saw that a similar apprehensiveness kept emerging throughout the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations. Take, for example, the description of the Saint Martin Parade on the Sharing Arts Society's website:

The Saint Martin Parade is an atmospheric, annually recurring event full of light, lanterns, and music that wants to keep the memory alive of the legend of the Roman Martin, who cut his red cloak in half with his sword to help a beggar chilled to the bone.

Martin is a worldwide icon with many faces that is inseparable from Utrecht. All legends surrounding Martin attest to a dynamic figure who was not afraid to take risks and make unexpected decisions. The impulsive act of sharing his cloak with a beggar in need is only one of the examples. The stubbornness [*eigenwijsheid*] of Martin attests to an open spirit who wants to give space to himself and others.<sup>18</sup>

The parade is described as an event in tribute to Martin the generous Roman soldier, "a worldwide icon." There is no mention of his saintly status, Jesus's appearance to him, or any other religious element. The parade's light sculpture of Martin also does not show any signs of Christianity, such as a cross or clerical clothing. Instead, it depicts a soldier with a cloak on horseback (see figure 10.2). As with the relics, which elements are incorporated and which are not are not coincidental but rather the result of deliberate negotiations. The story that gets foregrounded is that of the peaceful soldier who shared half his cloak with a stranger in need. This means, as Sprenger explained to me, that in the parade, "the cross doesn't go on the helmet, because for a moment, he [Saint Martin] belongs to and is there for everyone."



**Figure 10.2.** The light sculpture of Saint Martin, 2018: a soldier on horseback, deliberately without showing signs of Christianity. © Welmoed Fenna Wagenaar.

The Saint Martin's Assembly and the SAS were not the only stakeholders who carefully negotiated what parts of the narrative would find their way to the front stage. At a storytelling event in the Utrecht Archives, I spoke to an actor who refrained from telling the public that it was Jesus who revealed himself to Martin in a dream the night after Martin gave away his cloak. Instead, he spoke about “a voice,” telling Martin he had done well. When I asked him about this afterward, he explained that the appearance of Jesus was “too Christian” for his taste. A tour guide of a Saint Martin children's tour at the Dom Tower explained that it is important to “not present certain things as fact” when telling kids and their parents about the history of the saint, because “you don't want to preach.” At the first official meeting of the

network of Dutch Saint Martin cities, representatives discussed tactics for applying for funding, concluding that it is sometimes more effective to refer to Saint Martin as a “*schutspatroom*” (a patron) rather than a “*beschermheilige*” (a patron saint) so as to avoid any associations with religion.

On all these occasions, Saint Martin is framed in a way that I would argue “veils” religious symbols and interpretations. The notion of veiling is helpful here because the strategy used to deal with Saint Martin’s religious history does not fully dispose of religious elements, nor is it meant to do so. When asked, no one would deny Saint Martin’s history as a Christian bishop or his status as a saint. Instead, as if there were a thin piece of cloth preventing us from looking at it directly, religion gets concealed just enough to keep it confined to the background. The question that remains, then, is what this piece of cloth entails—what the veil is that religion gets hidden behind.

## A Secular Veil of Universality

An essential part of reinventing the heritage of Saint Martin has been the act of translation; as we saw earlier, the Saint Martin’s Assembly aims to “translate” Saint Martin’s philosophy of “sharing the cloak” to a “modern, pluriform society.” In an interview with magazine *Immaterieel Erfgoed*, van Deventer argued:

Saint Martin was of course a Christian saint from the fourth century, long before the church split. But we believe his meaning transcends the religions. Saint Martin stands for the universal values of solidarity, peace, sharing together and is a feast of light. Feasts of light exist in many religions. We try to propagate that the spirit of Saint Martin goes beyond religions and politics. (Meier 2014: 47, translation by the author)

For the assembly and the SAS, the Christian dimension should never become primary to the Saint Martin celebrations. Sprenger and Feld both explained to me that the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations are an “a-religious” feast—not anti-religious, as Christian communities are very much welcome to participate in and contribute to the celebrations, but supposedly neutral toward religion. Specifically, they view Saint Martin as an a-religious feast because the value of sharing is interpreted and presented as a *universal* value, contributing to the notion of Martin as “a worldwide icon” (as seen in the previous section).

The frame of universality put forward in establishing the meaning of Saint Martin does not stand on its own, but is—as is typical of many heritage formations—connected to a secular gaze. This gaze, viewed as a political and social neutrality rather than as anti-religious (Engelke 2012: 161), is grounded

in the European post-Enlightenment separation of church and state, which seeks to confine religion to a private realm (in this case “the church”) and views the public domain (in this case “the city”) as the realm of the secular (Asad 2003; Casanova 1994; Salemink 2009). This is most apparent in the prominent connections between the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations and secular initiatives and institutions. Every year, the Saint Martin Parade derives its theme from one of seventeen United Nations Global Goals. The Global Goals are the successors of the Millennium Goals: sustainable development goals that, according to the UN website, are meant to “build a better future for everyone.”<sup>19</sup> In 2018, the theme of the parade was goal number sixteen: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The SAS translated this to the slightly less abstract “peace and safety for everyone,” with the subtheme of “building bridges.” This also provided an opportunity to connect the Saint Martin Parade 2018 to the one-hundred-year anniversary of the World War I Armistice, signed on 11 November 1918.<sup>20</sup> Practitioners were asked to create light sculptures related to peace and bridges, and the reused sculpture of a bird (in early editions of the parade meant to represent the Saint Martin’s goose) functioned as a peace dove. The parade began with a brief speech by the Dutch minister of education, culture, and science, who, like other government officials before her, gave the parade’s start sign.

The creation of a secular gaze also arises in how the current Saint Martin celebrations are legitimized and authenticated through references to the past. In minutes of a meeting between stakeholders of the parade, Feld was quoted as saying that the medieval Saint Martin feast was “the biggest annual outdoor feast [*outdoorfeest*],” “owned by the guilds, thus owned by the city and therefore secular.”<sup>21</sup> Sprenger on several occasions referred to the work of cultural historian Llewellyn Bogaers to defend this viewpoint. Bogaers, who has written extensively about the city of Utrecht in the (late) Middle Ages, describes how the medieval Saint Martin feast included a market fair with bonfires, music, dance, and theater. Members of the city council, accompanied by musicians, walked through the streets in a torchlight procession, which because of the absence of clergy is described by Bogaers as “no actual procession” (Bogaers 2008: 297–99). Bogaers also writes that the Saint Martin feast included religious ceremonies where the city council was present and that religious purpose was an important motivation behind many medieval practices, including those performed by city councils, but the presence of a procession without clergy serves for the Saint Martin’s Assembly and the SAS as proof that the Saint Martin feast has a legitimate origin as an a-religious celebration.

The explicit connections made between the Saint Martin celebrations and secular initiatives and institutions, linked to a discourse of universality, provide an effective alternative to Christian symbolics and interpretations.



They serve as the veil that confines religion to the background so as to keep in line with the custodians' aims to establish the heritage of Saint Martin as being of broad societal significance. Legitimizing the secular gaze by means of academic research, moreover, means that the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations in their current form maintain their connection to the past and hence their label of authenticity, without risking being painted as a religious feast after all.

## Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated the significance of the management involved in making a secularized religious practice be recognized and appreciated as cultural heritage. Remarkably, while the Saint Martin tradition no longer holds religious connotations in the Netherlands, Saint Martin's religious provenance (re-)emerged as an important factor in the management of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations. In these celebrations, which have taken a completely new form over the past twenty years, the focus on the figure of Saint Martin and his moral values creates the possibility of foregrounding traditional religious interpretations and elements of Saint Martin's story. However, in a society where religious rituals and celebrations have become part of public debates on inclusion and exclusion and where heritage management inevitably involves a politics of funding in which accounting for diversity is a criterion, the potential foregrounding of religion becomes a risk that requires constant negotiation. In other words, if heritagization is to succeed, stakeholders continually need to make choices about where to position the heritage formation in the broader heritage landscape and where to position "religion" within the heritage's narrative framework. The heritagization of (secularized) religious celebrations in the Netherlands therefore not only involves an anxiety about people forgetting the "true meanings" of Christian holidays, it also involves an anxiety about the simultaneous aversion many Dutch people still feel toward institutionalized religion. This creates a tension that even the most proficient heritage custodians continue to struggle with, ultimately raising the issue of what it means to be truly inclusive and manage a heritage accordingly.

**Welmoed Fenna Wagenaar** is a PhD researcher at the Department of Comparative Study of Religion of the University of Groningen. Her project, funded by the Dutch Research Council, examines processes of ritual and sacralization in the everyday, online practices of media fans. Prior to this, she was a junior researcher at the Meertens Institute (KNAW), where she conducted research on the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations as part of the

HERILIGION: The Heritagization of Religion and the Sacralization of Heritage in Contemporary Europe project. She received her MA cum laude in religious studies from the University of Groningen, specializing in the fields of ritual and popular culture.

## NOTES

A word of thanks to the HERILIGION team, especially Irene Stengs, for valuable comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this chapter. In addition, I am extremely grateful to all those who were willing to participate in this research by allowing me to interview them and/or participate in their events: our research partner Museum Catharijneconvent, Citypastoraat Domkerk Utrecht, Gilde Utrecht, the Sharing Arts Society, Sint Martinusparochie Utrecht, Stadslab RAUM, Stichting De Vrolijkheid, Stichting Zorgen Participatie, the Utrecht Archives, the Utrecht Public Library, Utrecht Marketing, De Voorkamer, and Wijkspeeltuin De Boog. I also want to sincerely thank the Saint Martin's Assembly, Rien Sprenger in particular, for their openness and help during this project.

1. Saint Martin's Day has traditionally been celebrated in the north and northwest of the Netherlands, as well as some places in the south. People who moved from these regions to other places often took the tradition of Saint Martin with them and (re)introduced it in their new neighborhoods (Helsloot 2001: 502).
2. This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork, conducted from September 2018 to August 2019, as part of the HERILIGION: The Heritagization of Religion and Sacralization of Heritage in Contemporary Europe project, funded by Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) grant # 5087-00505A. The majority of the fieldwork was done in October and November, when (the preparations for) the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations 2018 took place. In this period, I participated in a variety of activities and events, talked informally to practitioners and organizers, and conducted semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders of the celebrations (among which its custodians), several participants of the Saint Martin Parade, and representatives from two of the largest local church communities. I also analyzed policy papers and promotional material from stakeholders and other organizations related to the Saint Martin Celebrations, such as subsidy providers.
3. Special church services are not always part of Saint Martin celebrations. In the Netherlands, the Saint Martin tradition generally does not include religious elements, although there are places (like Utrecht) where local church communities celebrate their own Saint Martin Mass or another kind of church service.
4. John Helsloot, "Sint-Maarten," 2007, [http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/cms/nl/?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=141193](http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/cms/nl/?option=com_content&view=article&id=141193) (accessed February 2019).
5. Such a transformation has also been understood in terms of the migration of the holy, where the nation-state has become the new object of devotion (see Cavanaugh 2011).
6. Black Pete is a blackface character that plays the role of Saint Nicholas's servant during the Dutch annual Sinterklaas feast. Due to its connections to slavery and racist stereotypes, the character has become strongly criticized and the subject of a heated public discussion about racism, national identity, and tradition in the Neth-

erlands. The sentiment that people “from other backgrounds” threaten the culture and identity of “actual Dutch people” plays an important role in this debate (see, e.g., Balkenhol 2015). It is within this context—more specifically, in reaction to a lawsuit that proclaimed Black Pete to contain negative stereotyping of black people—that the association Stichting Sint en Pietengilde decided to apply the Sinterklaas celebration, including “black petes,” for admission to the Dutch Inventory Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2014. As Stengs has pointed out (2018: 9), this admission is not just aimed at safeguarding the feast’s position on the annual calendar (which is not under scrutiny). It rather serves as a way to establish how the feast, albeit with some room for change, is “supposed to be” celebrated.

7. Initially, the Saint Martin’s Assembly consisted of representatives of different cultural and religious organizations, such as the Utrecht Archives, the Tourist Information Office, and Protestant and Catholic church parishes. Over time, this model disappeared, and currently the assembly is run by eleven volunteers, many of them with personal religious backgrounds but primarily active in the city’s cultural sector. The assembly is part of the Association Saint Martin, a (slightly) broader organization that also organizes the annual Open Garden Day Utrecht.
8. Specifically, this initiative came from music centers Muziekhuis Utrecht and Fort van de Verbeelding, made possible via a national funding program titled *Volkscultuur en Immaterieel Erfgoed*.
9. This centrality is, for example, apparent in the upcoming celebration of the city’s nine-hundred-year anniversary of its city rights: the Saint Martin celebrations will form the finale of the anniversary activities. The willingness of the municipality to include Saint Martin in large city events is partly due to smart storytelling on part of the Saint Martin’s Assembly and its foremost partners, as they are able to present Saint Martin in a way that matches the city’s recent brand of “creativity and connecting,” which also involves being “welcoming” (“Meerjarenplan 2017–2020,” Utrecht Marketing, p. 8, <https://www.utrechtmarketing.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/UTM-17-015-Meerjarenplan.pdf>, accessed May 2019).
10. “Organisatie,” Sint Maarten Utrecht, <https://sintmaartenutrecht.nl/organisatie> (accessed June 2019). Translation by the author.
11. Hence being part of the Dutch HERILIGION research program.
12. “Organisatie,” Sint Maarten Utrecht, <https://sintmaartenutrecht.nl/organisatie> (accessed June 2019). Translation by the author.
13. “Sint Maarten Parade,” Sharing Arts Society, <http://www.sharingartssociety.com/sint-maarten-parade/> (accessed June 2019). Translation by the author.
14. “Procedure and Criteria,” Kenniscentrum Immaterieel Erfgoed Nederland, <https://www.immaterieelerfgoed.nl/en/procedure/> (accessed July 2019).
15. “Meer dan de helft Nederlanders niet religieus,” Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2018, <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2018/43/meer-dan-de-helft-nederlanders-niet-religieus> (accessed February 2019).
16. “Kennisplan 2015–2020,” Museum Catharijneconvent, [https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/documents/19/Kennisplan\\_2015-2020\\_oyoeaRH.pdf](https://www.catharijneconvent.nl/documents/19/Kennisplan_2015-2020_oyoeaRH.pdf) (accessed December 2018).
17. The apprehension toward including historical objects from the museum in the Saint Martin celebrations is especially remarkable knowing that objects from the contemporary celebrations did move *into* the museum. In what is perhaps the most telling

example of the heritagization and subsequent status of the Utrecht Saint Martin celebrations, since 2017 Museum Catharijneconvent has included a light sculpture and video of the Saint Martin Parade in their permanent exhibition on religious feasts and holidays.

18. “Sint Maarten Parade,” Sharing Arts Society, <http://www.sharingartssociety.com/sint-maarten-parade/> (accessed June 2019). Translation by the author.
19. “The 17 Goals,” Global Goals website, <https://www.globalgoals.org/> (accessed May 2019).
20. The Saint Martin’s Assembly and the Sharing Arts Society are not the first to link the WWI Armistice to Saint Martin. During the interwar period, the Dutch branch of the International Women’s League for Peace and Freedom (Vrouwenbond voor Vrede en Veiligheid) set out to give the Saint Martin feast “new content” by linking it to Armistice Day. Together with progressive Protestant groups and schoolteachers, they organized processions where children carried peace emblems, slogans, and symbols like doves and peace angels. Back then, the makeover received criticism: the general public opinion was that it destroyed “the character” of Saint Martin (Helsloot 2001: 505–6). I am not sure the assembly and the SAS were aware of this connection; if they were, they did not mention it.
21. It may come as no surprise that when the minutes of this meeting were sent around, Museum Catharijneconvent—rightfully—commented on this statement by saying, “This is factually incorrect; in the Middle Ages the concept ‘secular’ did not yet exist—everyone and everything (thus also the city) was Christian.” Feld agreed to remove the “and therefore secular” from the minutes; the “statement without the conclusion” would be fine.

## REFERENCES

- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Balkenhol, Markus. 2015. “Zwarte Piet, racisme, emoties,” *Waardenwerk* 62/63: 36–46.
- Balkenhol, Markus, and Ernst van den Hemel. 2018. “Zwarte pieten, moskeebezoek en zoenende mannen. Katholiek activisme van Cultuur onder Vuur en de culturalisering van religie,” *Religie en Samenleving* 14(1): 5–30.
- Bendix, Regina. 2009. “Heritage between Economy and Politics: An Assessment from the Perspective of Cultural Anthropology,” in Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa (eds.), *Intangible Heritage*. London: Routledge, pp. 253–69.
- Bendix, Regina, Aditya Eggert, and Arnika Peselmann (eds.). 2013. *Heritage Regimes and the State*, 2nd edn. Göttingen: Universitätsverlag Göttingen.
- Boer, Eugenie. 2009. “Sint Nicolaas, een levende legende,” in Willem Koops, Madelon Pieper, and Eugenie Boer (eds.), *Sinterklaas verklaard*. Amsterdam: SWP, pp. 11–34.
- Bogaers, Llewellyn. 2008. *Aards, betrokken en zelfbewust. De verwevenheid van cultuur en religie in katholiek Utrecht, 1300–1600*. Utrecht: Levend Verleden Utrecht.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Cavanaugh, William T. 2011. *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

- Duyvendak, Jan Willem, Peter Geschiere, and Evelien Tonkens (eds.). 2016. *The Culturalization of Citizenship: Belonging and Polarization in a Globalizing World*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Engelke, Matthew. 2012. "Angels in Swindon: Public Religion and Ambient Faith in England," *American Ethnologist* 39(1): 155–70.
- Frijhoff, Willem. 2011. *De mist van de geschiedenis. Over herinneren, vergeten en het historisch geheugen van de samenleving*. Nijmegen: VanTilt.
- Helsloot, John. 2001. "An Element of Christian Liturgy? The Feast of St Martin in the Netherlands in the 20th Century," in Paul Post et al. (eds.), *Christian Feast and Festival: The Dynamics of Western Liturgy and Culture*. Leuven: Peeters, pp. 493–518.
- Hemel, Ernst van den. 2017. "The Dutch War on Easter: Secular Passion for Religious Culture and National Rituals," *Yearbook for Ritual and Liturgical Studies* 33: 1–19.
- Köbben, André J. F. 1983. *De zaakwaarnemer*. Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus.
- Lauvrijs, Bart. 2004. *Een jaar vol feesten: oorsprong, geschiedenis en gebruiken van de belangrijkste jaarfeesten*. Antwerpen: Standaard.
- Meier, Elise. 2014. "In het voetspoor van Sint Maarten: Twee jaar op de Nationale Inventaris," *Immaterieel erfgoed* 3(3): 46–49.
- Meyer, Birgit, and Marleen de Witte. 2013. "Heritage and the Sacred: Introduction," *Material Religion* 9(3): 274–80.
- Nissen, Peter, and Else Rose. 1997. Introduction to Sulpicius Severus, *Het leven van de heilige Martinus*, trans. Peter Nissen and Else Rose. Kampen: Kok, pp. 9–25.
- Salemink, Oscar. 2009. "Afterword: Questioning Faiths? Casting Doubts," in Thomas D. DuBois (ed.), *Casting Faiths: Imperialism, Technology and the Transformation of Religion in East and Southeast Asia*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 257–63.
- Stengs, Irene. 2012. "Inleiding. Nieuwe Nederlandsheid in feest en ritueel," in Irene Stengs (ed.), *Nieuw in Nederland: Feesten en rituelen in verandering*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 9–24.
- Stengs, Irene. 2018. "Gepopulariseerde cultuur, ritueel en het maken van erfgoed." Inaugural Lecture, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, 9 November 2018.
- Van de Port, Mattijs, and Birgit Meyer. 2018. "Introduction: Heritage Dynamics; Politics of Authentication, Aesthetics of Persuasion and the Cultural Production of the Real," in Birgit Meyer and Mattijs Van de Port (eds.), *Sense and Essence: Heritage and the Cultural Production of the Real*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, pp. 1–39.