

Heritage as Management of Sacralities

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On Monday evening of 15 April 2019, the images of a burning Notre-Dame Cathedral shocked Paris and the world. As usual these days, part of the news coverage in the early hours of the fire consisted of interviews with stunned onlookers about what the church and its partial destruction meant to them. Many Catholic faithful were aghast and spent the evening and night praying for the salvation of this most holy church in France. Also beyond Paris and the flock of the faithful, many people expressed their absolute horror about the ravage, for Notre-Dame meant many things to many people and institutions around the world. Being one of the earliest and finest materializations of Gothic church architecture in the European Middle Ages, Notre-Dame is part of the World Heritage Site “Paris, Banks of the Seine.” In addition, Notre-Dame is a touristic icon of Paris and France known throughout the world. Finally, it is a focal point for local or national identification. These four aspects—as a major religious site, as cultural heritage, as icon, and as focus point for ontological identification—involve dimensions of religious and/or secular sacralization, and involve—often paradoxical—overlaps and *connections* with other fields: geographic, economic, cultural, social, political. Let me unpack these four aspects with their entangled dimensions here.

Notre-Dame is undeniably a religious site. At the time of the fire, some onlookers reportedly prayed or chanted hymns, but some of the mediated interviews start with “I am not Catholic/religious, but. . .” Unsurprisingly, Pope Frances tweeted, “Today we unite in prayer with the people of France,” as the Vatican News site emphasized the religious importance of Notre-Dame:

The Bishops of France said Notre-Dame’s influence “extends beyond the capital” and that it would remain “a major symbol of the Catholic faith.” They also

invited Catholics around the world to “be living stones of the Church,” especially as the faithful journey through the Holy Week and look to the hope of Christ’s Resurrection.¹

Beyond the Catholic Church, there was public sympathy from non-Catholic religious leaders in the world. The grand imam of Al-Azhar (the highest religious authority in Sunni Islam) tweeted, “I feel so sorry for the massive fire at the historical architectural masterpiece ‘Notre-Dame Cathedral’ in Paris, our hearts go out to our brothers in France, they deserve our full support.” This public expression of inter-religious sympathy is couched in surprisingly secular terms (in Talal Asad’s [2003] sense of the term) when the grand imam characterizes the church not as a site of worship but as a “historical architectural masterpiece”—which arguably voids the site of religious meaning.

Much of the interest in Notre-Dame is predicated on its cultural heritage status. UNESCO director-general Audrey Azoulay said, “We are all heartbroken. . . . Notre-Dame represents a historically, architecturally, and spiritually, outstanding universal heritage.” The director-general also announced that a rapid damage assessment would be carried out as soon as possible. “UNESCO stands by France in safeguarding and rehabilitating this invaluable heritage,” she said.² Here, the characterization of Notre-Dame as heritage of outstanding universal value is combined with the epithet “invaluable” (which I take to mean that its value cannot properly be measured). Yet, such calculations were made when the day after the fire French president Macron pledged to rebuild Notre-Dame “more beautifully than before” within five years.³ Even before that, during the time of the fire, estimations for rebuilding started to be made, and la Fondation du Patrimoine launched a national collection campaign while donations started to pour in immediately—even temporarily crashing its website.⁴ The fire started a competition in donations by two of the richest people in France, François-Henri Pinault (owner of Gucci), promising €100 million, and the Arnault family of Louis Vuitton, promising €200 million. In three days, French billionaires publicly committed almost €600 million, but three months later that money had not yet come in.⁵ Donations also poured in from the United States to what across the Atlantic is regarded as the capital of romance.⁶ So the heritage is considered invaluable, but its restoration is at the same time financially measurable; there is a political economy undergirding the invaluable heritage. The use of words like “invaluable” and “outstanding / universal value,” however, rhetorically places Notre-Dame as heritage beyond the realm of the material, thereby emphasizing its spiritual value, which is arguably a form of secular sacralization.

In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean MacCannel argues that the transformation of a site into a major tourist attraction—what he calls

“sight sacralization”—involves the mechanical and social reproduction of the “sacred object” (1999: 43–45).⁷ In other words, the site becomes sight becomes icon. Many commentators commented on Notre-Dame as an icon—for Paris, for France, for humanity. The Dutch prime minister Mark Rutte tweeted, “Paris and France were hit hard by a scorching fire in Notre-Dame, one of the most iconic buildings on our continent. This destructive fire is felt throughout Europe. Just wished Emmanuel Macron a lot of strength with this enormous catastrophe.”⁸ The iconicity is buttressed by connections with other fields of cultural valuation, like literature and popular culture, as captured in the words of UNESCO director-general Audrey Azoulay that “Notre-Dame . . . is also a monument of literary heritage, a place that is unique in our collective imagination.” The iconicity is made possible by the recognizability of the simplified form or shape of Notre-Dame (just like, in Paris, the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe), making it an exquisite material sign for Paris, both for Parisians and for tourists. In one of the many mini-interviews during the fire, an aging American couple who had booked a tour in Notre-Dame for the day after the fire professed to be deeply moved and shocked at its partial disappearance, even before they had the chance to see and experience it. And the day after the fire, British novelist Ken Follett flew to Paris and wrote within ten days *Notre-Dame: A Short History of the Meaning of Cathedrals* (2019), which he described as a declaration of love for Notre-Dame and the proceeds of which go 100 percent to its restoration.

Azoulay’s literary reference, however, is to Victor Hugo’s *Notre-Dame de Paris* (*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*), whose original publication in 1831 triggered a sense of shame in France over the state of the church and spurred on official restoration efforts. Many interviewees and commentators referred to the novel, but also to the Disney films and the musical. And the media picks it up when iconic people make that connection—for example, when the Brazilian football player Neymar, who plays for Paris Saint-Germain football club, tweeted the Disney cartoon figure of the “hunchback” Quasimodo to express his grief.⁹ Not only football players, but other sports figures like the Tour de France organizer ASO tweeted a photo of cyclists passing by Notre-Dame. What is relevant here is that iconicity is predicated on instant visual recognizability based on formal simplicity—in Paris brought out by Notre-Dame, the Eiffel Tower, and the Arc de Triomphe—making Notre-Dame an exquisite material sign for Paris, both for Parisians and for tourists. The recognizability of the sign is at the very least enhanced by such “cross-sectoral” recognition and “social reproduction” (cf. MacCannell 1989: 45) by iconic figures, like artists, sports heroes, and even politicians, as sources of iconic authority themselves.

Speaking of political figures, former president Trump tweeted (while attending, rather ironically, a roundtable at *Burnsville*, Minnesota), “God bless

the people of France!”¹⁰ which brings me to the issue of ontological identification. Many mini-interviews with onlookers in the various media expressed that the sight of the burning felt not just as if Paris was losing its heart, but indeed as if they were losing part of their body—a limb or something very essential to their being. On stormy Twitter, many outsiders felt compelled to use words that are normally reserved for the loss of a person—perhaps not exactly offering condolences, but wishing strength with the loss and recovery. Here the valuation of Notre-Dame is not just as heritage or icon, but as a part of self, which indeed is literally invaluable in the sense that its value is purportedly unmeasurable (although we know that there is a price and a limit to medical treatments, as human lives do have a price as well). During a visit to Notre-Dame three years after the fire, President Macron described its restoration “as a metaphor for the country pulling together as France reached the symbolic mark of 100,000 deaths from coronavirus.”¹¹ This status of Notre-Dame as a site of ontological identification beyond its religious aspect as the main site of Catholicism in France is based on a secular valuation of human life as the ultimate value, if we are to follow Talal Asad in his “non-definition” of the secular as not just the absence of religion, but as productive of specific, this-worldly discourses, subjectivities, and sensibilities (e.g., absence of disease and pain, human rights, pursuit of pleasure; cf. Asad 2003). To put it in other terms: a nonreligious valuation of Notre-Dame is ultimately predicated on a sacralization of humanity.

These four aspects of the Notre-Dame—as a major religious site, as cultural heritage, as icon, and as focus point for ontological identification—entail different but entangled kinds of valuation that may be paradoxical—as brought out in the religious and secular forms of sacralization. But the catastrophic sight of the fire brought all these different religious, national, cultural, and popular together in a seemingly frictionless manner, thereby exemplifying—at least temporarily—the UNESCO discourse about “exceptional universal value.” And in this exceptional case of near destruction, religious and secular heritage valuations reinforced each other.

However, the different valuations that adhere to religious heritage sites are not free-floating movements but are backed up by the authority of powerful institutions: the church, the state, experts, media, and—last but not least—both commercial and philanthropic capital. In Córdoba, the famous “mosque-cathedral” *la Mesquita* has been the arena for a long-running row between religious and political authorities over the ownership of the World Heritage Site, which was once known as the great mosque, but in which after the Christian reconquest in 1236 a cathedral was built. While the Catholic diocese claimed the site as an exclusive place of worship for Catholics, others operating since 2013 under the “Platform for the Mosque-Cathedral of Córdoba: Everyone’s Heritage” argued that it was a place of worship for

other religious groups as well as a cultural heritage site for everyone, regardless of religious affiliation. When in 2016 the church attempted to formalize and legalize their ownership claims, local authorities intervened: “Local authorities in Córdoba have dealt a blow to the Catholic church’s claim of legal ownership of the Spanish city’s mosque-cathedral, declaring that ‘religious consecration is not the way to acquire property.’”¹² In other words, different valuations entail different—religious and secular—sources of institutional authority and may involve conflicting claims over sites and their interpretation.

The above simplistic binary of religious versus secular valuations and authorities in Córdoba becomes more complicated when we move to another recent event involving a religious edifice inscribed on the World Heritage List, namely the Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya in Turkish) in Istanbul. The rise and consolidation of power of the Justice and Development (AK) Party under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey established a regime that Ayhan Kaya, in his *Populism and Heritage in Europe* (2020), characterizes as a form of Islamist populism. After the enforced secularism of Kemal Atatürk’s laicist policies that converted historical mosques like the Hagia Sophia to secular museums, Turkey is culturally and religiously increasingly neo-Ottomanist in its harking back to the Ottoman self-understanding as a nation of Islam (*millet*) (Kaya 2020: 201–27). In the 2010s, there was a growing movement to reconsecrate the Ayasofya as a mosque—an effort that in 2019 received support from President Erdoğan. A court case brought before the Turkish Council of State by an Islamist historical society unsurprisingly allowed for the reconversion as a mosque on 10 July 2020, on the same day followed by a presidential decree by Erdoğan.¹³

The move was condemned by many cultural, political, and religious authorities outside Turkey. UNESCO’s director-general expressed “serious concerns” in an official statement issued the same day under the heading “Hagia Sophia: UNESCO deeply regrets the decision of the Turkish authorities, made without prior discussion, and calls for the universal value of World Heritage to be preserved.” The main concern was whether its (secular but sacred) “outstanding universal value” would be sufficiently upheld under a religious regime—a concern that does not seem to extend to Catholic sites like Notre-Dame or Vatican City, also a listed World Heritage Site. The move was also protested by political leaders, not just former US secretary of state Mike Pompeo, but closer in the region by Greece and Cyprus. The Greek Ministry of Culture referred to the Hagia Sophia’s “international status” that would be violated, and the Greek culture minister, Lina Mendoni, called the decision an “open provocation to the civilised world,” since “Hagia Sophia, located on Turkey’s territory, in Istanbul, is a monument to all mankind, regardless of religion.” More interesting than these contestations between

political Islam and political and cultural secularism is the reaction of various Christian denominations. The patriarchs of the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches protested as well, claiming that altering the status quo of the Hagia Sophia “would fracture the eastern and western worlds.” Even the Catholic Pope Francis confessed to be “very distressed” over the decision—a very different reaction from the unified support pouring in during the Notre-Dame fire.¹⁴ Yet, as a mosque the Hagia Sophia remains eminently accessible to visitors and tourists, just like Notre-Dame, the Mesquita in Córdoba, and Saint Peter’s Basilica in the Vatican.

Here a complicated picture emerges, characterized not just by the divergence of cultural heritage and religious valuations, but by the entanglement of various religious valuations imposed on this palimpsestic structure (Christian church—Muslim mosque—secular museum—mosque *annex* museum), in which Christian iconography must now be hidden behind veils during Muslim services. To compound matters further, the various religious denominations are localized in specific countries or regions, and the political authorities of some of these countries champion the cause of “their” religion with regard to the Hagia Sophia.

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The three high-profile events at Notre-Dame in Paris, the Mesquita mosque-cathedral in Córdoba, and the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul provide a graphic illustration of the many angles and paradoxes pertaining to religious heritage. They speak to the various types of valuation—religious, cultural, political, also economic—that are projected to these prominent and historical religious structures; onto the different discourses and institutions that claim authority over such sites; onto the different constituencies—“heir” communities or congregations, cities, nations, and even global organizations (UNESCO) and publics—to whom such sites have meaning. How do these high-profile and highly politicized events in three prominent World Heritage Sites in Europe relate to the chapters in this volume? Also in the various chapters we see entanglements involving very different valuations, institutions, authorities, and publics, leading to vastly different figurations and outcomes.

In Denmark, the strong overlap of church, nation, state, and royalty in the conception of Danish heritage generates a strong discourse in which tensions and disagreement—if any—are backgrounded. In Jelling and Roskilde, the overlapping religious and cultural valuations are managed by the same institutions or by institutions that are deeply intertwined—and sometimes by people who combine religious and heritage responsibilities. The two English cases—Saint Peter Hungate in Norwich and the Abbey of St Edmund—testify in different ways to the divergence between religious and cultural valuations through the historical processes of reformation and de-churching.

At the same time, these cases show the incompleteness of secularization, as brought out in present-day attempts to reconquer “spiritual ground” in Saint Peter Hungate and the Abbey of St Edmund respectively. Thus, religious valuations and acts of sacralization make inroads in deconsecrated churches that have become cultural heritage sites.

The two Dutch cases showcase the trend in staging Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* during Lent and the festival of Saint Martin in Utrecht, in a country that purports to be thoroughly secular—even more than Denmark and Great Britain. A sacral composition intended as a Christian service during Bach’s times, the *Saint Matthew Passion* is performed as a musical concert for a highbrow audience of paying music lovers. Even when performed in a church, the *Saint Matthew Passion* is a hybrid affair in which secular-cultural and religious expectations intermingle. Such intermingling also takes place at Utrecht’s Saint Martin festival, which is an originally Christian saint’s day that became a secularized children’s feast in the Netherlands. Church clergy and laypeople who are involved in the organization, however, seek to emphasize religious elements in the celebration, as if in a surreptitious religious “counteroffensive” in the children’s feast. As in the English cases, the Dutch cases reveal somewhat hidden religious sensibilities and agendas against a secular heritage backdrop.

The Portuguese cases presented in this book offer a complex picture of four sites and more diverse religions and population groups, against the backdrop of Catholic nationalism and a state-mandated, cosmopolitanizing discourse of “lusotropicalism” that portrays Portugal as a benevolent, inclusive colonial power in past and present. The latter discourse is enacted through a careful curation of the past in cultural heritage sites like Sintra and Mértola, whereas Catholic nationalist discourses afford the backdrop for the famous pilgrimage site of Fátima and the rough Mouraria neighborhood in Lisbon. In all cases, diverging religious sensibilities are co-opted and domesticated through secularist heritage policies that offer space for celebrating diverse religious identities.

The two Polish cases, the “chakra” worship at the royal Wawel Hill, which is part of a World Heritage Site, and the Rękawka celebration on Krakus Mound—both in Kraków—reveal stronger acts of dissent against an authorized heritage discourse (cf. Smith 2006) that fuses Polish nationhood and Catholic religion in official assertions of cultural heritage. Wawel Hill is believed to be a nodal point of an “Earth chakra,” publicly revered by a variety of different people in spite of official attempts at suppression. On nearby Krakus Mound, the Rękawka celebration just after Easter consists of re-enactments of early medieval Slavic rituals—an occasion used by Polish Pagans to enact their rituals undisturbed by the religious and heritage authorities. So in contrast with the reconquest of spiritual ground in the two

English cases, the two Polish ones show how subaltern religious groups enact but simultaneously subvert and transform official, intertwined religious and heritage valuations.

Taken together, the case studies show how different (institutional) actors, interests, and valuations interweave through time. Sometimes, various religious and cultural heritage valuations work to reinforce each other, as most clearly brought out in official heritage discourses and practices in Denmark, Poland, and Portugal where religious heritage sites, objects, and practices are appropriated by the state as symbolic of the nation. As such, religious and heritage valuations can be seen as mutually reinforcing, much along the lines of the “religious heritage complex” as sketched by Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales: “The religious heritage complex illustrates how secularity and the sacred form a relational system that binds religious interests and lay motivations, allowing the actors to legitimate their own domain of activity” (2020: 216). For Isnart and Cerezales, such convergence of heritage and religious valuations supports their view that “the superposition of heritage and religious practices and values of conservation helps us to rethink what is deemed as a divide between religious and secular domains [and] permits us to reassess a simplistic explanation of heritage making referred to as the ‘migration of the holy’” (209). In other words, in contrast with religious forms of sacrality, cultural heritage involves a sacralization of sites, objects, and practices that relate to secular principles that are most authoritatively promulgated by UNESCO, but Isnart and Cerezales interpret the eventual convergence of religious and heritage interests as offering an analytical argument for the conflation of the two.

The cases offered in this volume show that such valuations may converge at times, but they can also diverge, resulting in hidden or open tensions that may be irreconcilable but that nevertheless have to be managed. The management of such tensions might entail a wide variety of tactics, like hybridization and bureaucratic proliferation (in the Danish sites described in this book). They might evoke tacit expectations of how to behave during performances of Bach’s *Saint Matthew Passion* in the Netherlands. They might involve overt curated narratives of the past, as in some Portuguese cases. They might involve official attempts to police heritage sites and cleanse them of undesirable religious practices, as in Sintra (Portugal) and on Wawel Hill (Kraków). In such religious heritage settings, the management of such tensions between religious and secular sensibilities and valuations is in fact a management of secular and religious sacralities.

To complicate the analytical angle offered by Isnart and Cerezales even more, cultural heritage can be an arena for differing religious claims from a variety of different religious groups. Unsurprisingly, in countries that by and large define themselves in terms of a dominant Christian denomination—

which in the five countries covered in this book would include Denmark, Poland, and Portugal—official cultural heritage is discursively, politically, and practically very much entangled with the material expression of that dominant religion. But precisely *because* of the principles by which cultural heritage is valued, validated, and evaluated, it might afford opportunities for subaltern religious groups to assert their claims or at least to claim a presence, as we have seen in the case studies in Poland and Portugal and to a lesser extent also in Bury St Edmunds in the UK. In the de-churched context of the Netherlands, nationalist movements increasingly define Christianity as the leitmotif for Dutch culture and identity as part of a broader, supposedly “Judeo-Christian” civilization in Europe. This leads to new fault lines and new practices of in- and exclusion (van den Hemel 2014). In such situations, cultural heritage becomes an arena for tensions between multiple—secular and religious—sacralities that need to be managed in ways that at least pay lip service to the supremacy of cultural heritage within a heritage regime (cf. Geismar 2015). Ultimately, that heritage regime and its attendant “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith 2006) derive their authority from an international convention overseen by an intergovernmental organization, UNESCO.

UNESCO’s definition of heritage in terms of “outstanding universal value,” its criteria, and its list have been replicated in member countries, regions, and cities in staggered fashion (Askew 2010). The heritage values listed by UNESCO construe the value of any cultural heritage “property”—or in the case of cultural practices, “intangible cultural heritage”—against a global scale, with “humanity” at the top. In some cases, such valuation renders specific sites “invaluable,” as is the case of Notre-Dame of Paris, the Mesquita mosque-church in Córdoba, and the Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. These are sacred sites from a religious vantage point, but also from a secular heritage vantage point predicated on criteria emanating from “humanity.” The fire in Notre-Dame shows that invaluable heritage also has price tags attached to it, meaning that at least to some extent their value is measurable after all. In such religious heritage settings, then, this supposedly “invaluable” heritage valuation is comparable, and to some extent commensurate, with other valuations—not just financial but also religious.¹⁵ These tensions may be subdued, subterranean even, but they are nevertheless real, and they refer to or derive from different—religious and secular—sacralities, as brought out in the various chapters of this volume no less so than in the more politicized tensions surrounding the high-profile World Heritage Sites mentioned above. The management of such religious heritage sites, objects, and practices is tantamount to managing the different sacralities involved and their mutual entanglements, disentanglements, and tensions, sometimes openly but more often subtly and in subdued manner—for example, by a parental

nudge to a child to not applaud after the performance of Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* in a church.

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NOTES

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1. See <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2019-04/pope-francis-notre-dame-fire-closeness-prayers.html> (accessed 15 October 2021).
2. See <https://en.unesco.org/news/fire-notre-dame-cathedral-paris-unesco-stands-france-safeguard-and-rehabilitate-historic> (accessed 15 October 2021).
3. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/17/notre-dame-fire-macron-promises-to-make-cathedral-more-beautiful-than-before> (accessed 15 October 2021).
4. See <https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/1114813/notre-dame-fire-paris-cathedral-news-update-Henri-Pinault-Bernard-Arnault>; https://www.rtb.be/info/monde/detail_incendie-a-notre-dame-de-paris-la-fondation-du-patrimoine-lance-mardi-une-collecte-nationale?id=10197206; the website <https://www.fondation-patrimoine.org/> even briefly crashed the evening of the fire (all accessed 15 October 2021).
5. See <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jul/18/ruins-notre-dame-billionaires-french-philanthropy> (accessed 15 October 2021).
6. See <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/aug/08/notre-dame-paris-why-have-americans-given-so-much-money-to-restore> (accessed 15 October 2021).
7. In *The Tourist* (1989: 44–45), Dean MacCannell distinguishes five stages in the “sight sacralization” of tourist attractions: the naming phase, the framing and elevation phase, enshrinement, mechanical reproduction, and social reproduction.
8. See <https://nltimes.nl/2019/04/16/dutch-pm-wishes-france-strength-notre-dame-fire> (accessed 15 October 2021).
9. See <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-6926099/Neymar-Paul-Pogba-express-grief-Notre-Dame-cathedral-fire.html> (accessed 15 October 2021).
10. See <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1117910111236681728> (accessed 15 October 2021).

11. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/15/notre-dame-cathedral-repair-is-a-metaphor-for-pulling-together-france-emmanuel-macron-says> (accessed 16 October 2021).
12. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/13/cordoba-catholic-churchs-claim-mosque-cathedral>; also <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/05/cordoba-mosque-cathedral-name-change-row-andalusia> (accessed 16 October 2021).
13. See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/30/ayasofya-the-mosque-tur-ned-museum-at-the-heart-of-an-ideological-battle>; and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/10/turkey-court-ruling-paves-way-for-istanbuls-ayasofya-to-revert-to-mosque> (both accessed 16 October 2021).
14. See <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-statement-hagia-sophia-istanbul>; <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-07/angelus-pope-remembers-seafarers.html>; and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/12/pope-francis-very-distressed-over-hagia-sophia-mosque-move> (accessed 15 October 2021).
15. The commensurability of such valuations might resemble Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the commensurability of the "four capitals" (including cultural capital), while the tension between these different valuations speaks to the relative autonomy of the fields (in this case the "art field") as sources of valuation (Bourdieu 1993).

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