Welcome to the Religion and Culture Web Forum's public discussion board for November 2007. In this thread you will find the invited responses from Michael Berenbaum, Alison Landsberg, and Edward Linenthal.

To leave your own question or response to Elizabeth McKeown's essay or to another posting, choose "post reply." In order to submit a comment, you must register with a personal user ID and password.

Debra Erickson
Editor, Religion and Culture Web Forum

I was impressed by Elizabeth McKeown’s paper on “Religion and Museums on the National Mall.” Both subjects are dear to me. I am one of the few – if not the only – trained theologians and professors of religious studies to have spent more than a quarter century working on museums.

A word of personal history is required: I was Deputy Director of the President’s Commission on the Holocaust (PCH), appointed by President Jimmy Carter in 1978, which led to the creation of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council. I left the staff in 1980 and returned in 1987 (after the resignation of Elie Wiesel as chairman), first as a consultant and later as Project Director of the Museum’s creation. I then served as Director of the Holocaust Research Institute from 1993-
Describing the architecture of the Museum, McKeown writes that “James Ingo Freed’s building design has won extensive praise for translating the European Holocaust landscape into this monumental neighborhood...its limestone and brick exterior makes a gesture of incorporation into its American context.” In contrast, the “National Museum of the American Indian makes no concessions to its neighborhood.”

The reasons are far less aesthetic and far more political.

Few disputed the place of the Native Americans in the national narrative and hence the NMAI’s presence in the monumental core of the nation. The place of the Holocaust and hence of the Holocaust Memorial Museum was deeply contested. To win approval for the Museum project, several basic concessions were made, not least restricting the protrusion of the Hall of Remembrance so it would not cross site lines of pre-existing buildings or be visible from the Mall.

Freed’s design had to be negotiated with the National Capital Planning Commission, the Commission on Fine Arts, and its influential chairman J. Carter Brown. It also had to be responsive to the criticism of [i]Washington Post[/i] architectural critic Benjamin Forgey, who was “worried about the intrusion of the Museum into the Mall.”

When the Museum was described to a focus group as not being on the Mall, but merely adjacent to it, objections to the Museum diminished considerably. Though criticism continues, the number of visitors, their diversity, and the quality of their visits has stilled major opposition. Nevertheless, historian Peter Novick and [i]Washington Post[/i] writer Mark Fischer continue to criticize the Museum even though they do not imagine it will be closed.

The [i]Report to the President[/i] of the PCH argued for the presence of the USHMM in the vicinity of monumental Washington and museum Washington. The Report said: “if the Smithsonian represents the accomplishments of civilization, the Holocaust illuminates an alternate dimension of human experience...the museum would allow the presentation of a more complete picture of civilization, a greater vision of its promises and dangers.”

I think that Professor McKeown overestimates Elie Wiesel’s influence in the years between his resignation as chairman in 1986 and the opening of the USHMM in 1993. When he resigned, he was replaced by his rivals who undertook the concrete tasks of funding and building the Museum. He had not left behind a story line and the museum was virtually without a collection. Staff was replaced and a new team was brought in. Only after its opening was peace sought between Wiesel and the Museum’s leadership, and, after several years and changes in leadership, it was achieved.
Wiesel’s concept of the Holocaust as the *mysterium tremendum*, an Event that can be approached but never understood, made the efforts at creating the Museum difficult, if not impossible. “That world is not our world,” he said. “Only those who were there will ever know and those who were there can never tell,” which leaves the non-survivor – both scholar and museum creator alike – with an impossible task. They must begin with the assumption that the story of the Holocaust can be understood by those who were not there. If, in the end, a measure of comprehension eludes us – as it inevitably will – so be it. The limits of knowledge should not paralyze us in the beginning.

Michael Rosenak, the influential Israeli philosopher of education, has argued that all translation is partial. Something is gained in the transmission into another language, another culture, another form or another genre – and something it lost.

With regard to artifacts, the debate over the inclusion of hair was really about how powerful the museum should be, how much it should expose the vulnerability of its victims and their dehumanization by the perpetrators. Hair was to be included in the exhibition, despite some objections, until two women survivors personalized the discussion and exercised the privilege of their unique situation. *It could have been their hair*. Their head and their bodies had been sheared, not ours. And thus, for peace within, it was decided to show temporarily – temporary is now 14 ½ years – a picture rather than to display the hair. There is no doubt that a picture of hair, rather than actual hair, weakens the exhibition and most visitors pass by without understanding what they are seeing and why. The museological issue is: how to display an extraordinarily powerful artifact in such a way that the power of the artifact is not alienating but engaging, offering greater understanding and emotional impact.

My colleague and friend, the late Jeshajahu Weinberg, may have wanted “a straightforward narrative at the expense of ambiguity,” but that is not what the visitor gets from the USHMM. Working with him day and night for eight years, I never heard him back away from ambiguity. The film *Testimony*, which concludes the permanent exhibition, was made deliberately ambiguous despite significant pressure to end with a happy story, a triumphant narrative. The Museum’s permanent exhibition does address the non-bombing of Auschwitz more than once within the exhibition. It also was the subject of a joint conference (and resulting book) with the National Air and Space Museum that brought together military and Holocaust historians.

One final comment relating to the role of pilgrimage in the contemporary world: for many the journey to Washington is a pilgrimage undertaken with one’s class or one’s family. It is an important part of their experience as Americans and a significant encounter for non-Americans with American culture, government, and life. Many visitors to the USHMM – Jews and non-Jews alike – regard it
as a pilgrimage, and given that perhaps four times as many American Jews have visited the museum as have visited Israel, their own journey to Washington is clearly regarded as a pilgrimage. There is now enough empirical evidence regarding actual visits to permit such as analysis.

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Michael Berenbaum
The Berenbaum Group

Anonymous

Posted: 09 Nov 2007 15:59    Post subject: Ed Linenthal's response to Elizabeth McKeown

I agree wholeheartedly with Elizabeth McKeown's argument that museums offer students of religion the opportunity to think about "sacred objects and sacred spaces, memory and representation, comparison and definition." The term "religion," however, does not quite seem the right one to do justice to these dynamic processes of sacralization, veneration, defilement, and redefinition. Rather than begin a mind-numbing conversation on the meaning of or definition of "religion," however, let me think out from this lively essay on the charged symbolic space of the Washington Mall, now populated with a new generation of activist institutions that are both museum and memorial, and also populated with, in my opinion, a more vexing proliferation of huge memorials.

I am not sure that there is any single articulate civil or uncivil religious expression that dominates the Mall. (There is certainly an argument to be made, however, that the redemptive power of blood sacrifice and the centrality of war in defining the nation is a major memorial theme.) What seems clear to me is that many of the latest memorials want to trump the power of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and fail to do so. Some of these memorials—the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the FDR Memorial, the National World War II Memorial, for example—take up huge amounts of space.

Controversies that arose during the planning of the World War II Memorial were fascinating. Would its size disrupt the aesthetics of the Mall? Was such an overpowering memorial an appropriate statement? Amid the memorial-building enthusiasm of our time, there is, in my opinion, an arrogance and short-sightedness in our treatment of the Mall. There is now so little space left! Have we monumentalized too much, too quickly? Should we not leave for future generations the possibility of marking this space with that which has defined them?

These museums and memorials, of course, reveal more about those who create them than about the history they represent. Students of religion are certainly well-positioned to help us understand the cultural politics of the Washington Mall, the symbolic center of the nation.
Elizabeth McKeown begins her thought-provoking essay with the somewhat surprising claim that museums are “rich resources for the study of religion” in that they both “share modern roots in the Enlightenment,” and “currently enjoy huge popularity both in public life and in the academy.”

At first blush, the comparison seems a bit like apples and oranges—one lives a religion, but only visits a museum. Museums are institutions which mobilize particular discourses, disseminate knowledge, ideologies, etc, while religion is itself a discourse which then gets institutionalized in different ways and towards different ends in a wide range of social sites and practices. But the force of this comparison comes into focus when McKeown turns her discussion to “the sacred.” In particular, she seeks to explore the way in which “the sacred” operates at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), two of the more recently constructed museums on the National Mall.

Considering the sacred in museums seems fruitful on two somewhat distinct fronts: in terms of how curators handle materials on the one hand, and in terms of how visitors experience or relate to the material, on the other. First of all, does a religious object change once it has been taken out of use and put into a museum? Walter Benjamin describes this process in his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” writing that “we know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value”[1]

So for Benjamin, the aura that emanates from the work of art in a museum derives in part from the object’s prior religious/sacred function. In the case of bodily remains—which both the USHMM and NMAI have had to contend with—when does sacredness emerge? Are the remains sacred prior to their exaltation in the museum, or does that process enhance their sacral quality? One could make an entirely different argument here as well: since objects only gain meaning within a particular context, does the change of context—from the lived social world into the walled museum—change their meaning? By moving from lived object to object of knowledge, from use/meaning within a
particular group to a realm in which they are available for consumption to members outside of that group, are they not in some manner secularized?

If we accept that in a certain sense visitors to these museums do come into contact with the sacred, what are the precise contours of those experiences? Clearly, part of the fascination of museums for people has to do with their promise of unmediated experience—that they might bring people into contact with the past, or history. In fact, as historians Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen have shown, Americans trust museums more than any other source of information about the past (with the exception of family). Rosenzweig and Thelen discovered that when asked about the trustworthiness of sources of information about the past, survey respondents rated museums the highest, well above college history professors and history books.[ii] And what made museums so reliable and convincing was the presence of objects. When looking at these museums we need to consider the precise ways in which visitors are introduced to, and invited into a relationship with, objects.

However, there might be a downside to displaying the sacred in museums. As Rosenzweig and Thelen have demonstrated, people are inclined to accept what they learn in museums as truth. It is then the job of curators to convey to visitors that it is not “truth,” but rather an interpretation of the past that the museum creates. It may be an extremely rigorous and well-supported interpretation of the past, as in the cases of the USHMM and the NMAI, but it is an interpretation nonetheless. Once objects have been elevated to the realm of the sacred, they become removed from historical dialogue. A discourse that reifies the importance of those objects by labeling them as sacred runs the risk of obscuring the history behind them.

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