

## RELIGION AND MUSEUMS ON THE NATIONAL MALL

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2006 marked the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American Association of Museums. To commemorate that occasion, the U.S. House of Representatives declared 2006 “The Year of the Museum.” The Congressional resolution marking the occasion noted the importance of museums in national life: nearly 17,000 museums in the U.S. claim to receive more than 865,000,000 visits annually, bring a billion dollars a year into local economics, and contribute more than 18 million instructional hours to elementary and secondary education programs in communities across America. This essay extends the Congressional account of the importance of museums by suggesting that museums are also rich resources for the study of religion.

### **Similar Domains**

Museums and religion share some notable characteristics. Both terms represent forms of discourse and practice that share modern roots in the Enlightenment and common ancestors in the longer history of the West, and they have arrived in the 21<sup>st</sup> century sharing a parallel situation of success and instability. On the one hand, museums and religion currently enjoy huge popularity both in public life and in the academy. Museums claim more visitors than professional sports teams, and museum studies programs are flourishing in colleges and universities. Religious institutions continue to shape American culture, and attention to religion in the academy has risen dramatically in the last decade. Across the country and abroad, university centers specializing in political and social sciences and international relations find it expedient to hire people to talk and write about “religion.”

On the other hand, the two terms, and the practices they represent, face serious challenges. “Religion” is now threatened with subordination by the competing genus “culture” and experiences forceful rhetorical distancing from inside major traditions (“Is Christianity a ‘Religion?’” and “Islam Is Not a ‘Religion?’”). And while “museum” still evokes images of dusty collections and colonial ambitions, museum managers come under scrutiny for allowing their institutions to become hybrids that adopt corporate business practices and corporate measures of success, and wannabes that borrow too much from theme parks, shopping malls, and the internet.

Terms which share so much are good to think with. The word ‘museum’ (like the word ‘religion’) is a “family-resemblance” term. It encompasses sites with collections and sites without them; places with fine art and places with plants; places with originals and places with reproductions. Sometimes these places are stuffed with objects, and sometimes they have no objects at all. Some of them display great wealth and power; many are modest places with low budgets and uncertain futures. Museums are earnest and entertaining and ironic. And (again like “religion”), they’re everywhere.

Originally, museums were both containers for objects and places in which to think. They were founded on the classical practices of collection, classification, preservation and display. Although they are still places in which to think, they have become much more than containers. They are important local, regional, national, and international places that stage self-conscious public performances with historical, scientific, technical, aesthetic, ethnic, and popular content. Modern museum places include zoos, botanical gardens, shrines and houses of worship, children’s museums, outdoor museums and heritage sites, memorials, theme parks, and even archives. In addition to collection, preservation and display, museum practices now also include marketing and fund-raising, community consultation, and legal and political work. And contemporary museum scholarship covers

a spectrum that runs from traditional forms of research conducted inside museum collections to the burgeoning new field of museum studies that take museums themselves as the object of inquiry.

In the midst all this, museums also offer a place to think about religion: about sacred objects and sacred spaces, memory and representation, comparison and definition. And thinking about religion in this complex context can benefit both religious studies and museum studies. There is an opportunity for collaborative attention to ritual and performance; to sacred space and sacred objects; to relics, reliquaries, fetishes, and fragments; to gifts and gift-giving and possession(s); to the practices of collecting, classifying, and exhibiting; and to museums as pilgrimage sites and as places of memory.

Museum studies scholars recently begun to notice the resources available to them in discourses about religion and have begun to borrow concepts associated with the study of religion—myth, ritual, magic, and the sacred, in particular. There has been an explosion of literature on museum history and practice in the last two decades (much of which comes from European sources), and in it, there is growing evidence of this interest in religion.<sup>1</sup> In the United States, especially since the 1990 passage of the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), museum professionals have also begun to develop important on-the-job expertise in the role that “the sacred” plays in indigenous American cultures. Martin Sullivan, for example, who served as chair of the NAGPRA implementation committee, has developed a useful taxonomy of the “sacred objects and sacred knowledge” that reflects his extended experience with the work of the sacred in the museum context.<sup>2</sup>

Sullivan was also part of a benchmark initiative in the conversation between religion and museums that took place at Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions from 2001-2003. The “Religion and the Arts” colloquium culminated in the publication of a collection that reflected the

dimensions of that collaboration between universities and museums. *Stewards of the Sacred* (2004) deals specifically with the challenges to American museums presented by the 1990 NAGPRA legislation.<sup>3</sup>

The work of historian Edward Linenthal is another rich resource for the comparative study of museums and religion in America. Linenthal's *Preserving Memory: the Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (1995) provides an account of the planning and building of the United States Holocaust Museum, and the analyses by Linenthal and his colleagues on the topics of memory and sacred space suggest the contribution that religious studies scholarship can make to the study of museums.<sup>4</sup>

The National Mall in Washington hosts a range of museums and offers a good place to think further about religion and museums. Two of those—United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) will be the focus of attention for the remainder of this essay. I will provide brief description of the origins and practices of these two museums and underline some of the reciprocal opportunities for scholarship.

### **Different Museums**

The USHMM and the NMAI share one notable similarity: planners and directors at each institution insist that their museum is quite unique. USHMM spokespersons insist that “Both on the level of museum methodology and from the aspect of a museum’s function in society, the USHMM aims to be a museum of a different kind.”<sup>5</sup> It constructs a narrative of destruction. A few blocks down Independence Avenue, NMAI founding director, Richard West, Jr., has been equally concerned to build a “museum different.” He underscores this ambition by comparing the two museums: the NMAI, West says, is *not* an Indian Holocaust Museum. The deaths of millions of indigenous people

under colonial regimes are not the subject here. Survival is. Survival and the celebration of native identity.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the differences between these two places are readily apparent: one remembers a historical event; the other constructs a collective identity. Authorized by Congress in 1980, the USHMM was developed under the direction of the Presidentially-appointed United States Holocaust Memorial Council. In the beginning, the Council had no collection and no clear story. It took ten years of effort and consultation before Council leaders agreed on the story they wanted to tell. And then they had to scour Europe for the objects and images that would allow them to translate their account of the Holocaust to Washington.<sup>7</sup> The Indian Museum, on the other hand, began with an amazing number of objects—more than 800,000 of them. The problem for planners at the NMAI is that there is so much stuff—and so many stories to tell. What account to give of all the native communities and all the history represented by those 800,000 objects? How to make those stakeholders part of the design and curatorial process? How to classify, care for and exhibit those native objects in ways that would respect the objects themselves and the processes of their creation? What presentation strategies would distinguish this museum from the stale and sometimes racist dioramas of traditional “natural history” displays? How to gain the loyalties of native communities throughout the hemisphere and overcome native resistance to the whole idea of being “represented” in museums? Inevitably, NMAI designers found themselves telling many different stories in the effort to construct a common impression of native identity.

But it is also clear that in confronting the challenges of their missions, these two very different museums have some things in common. For instance, they have adopted a common strategy: each one engages in an act of “translation.” The USHMM translates “the Holocaust.” It brings twelve years and thousands of square miles of Nazi depredation to a new place—a 250,000 square-foot

space near the National Mall. To do this, it distills and condenses and miniaturizes. The NMAI translation, on the other hand, enlarges and expands the distinctive identities of a range of Native American communities into a collective “Native” presence in Washington.<sup>8</sup>

### **Constructing Memory**

The land for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum was donated by the federal government. Ground-breaking ceremonies took place in October 1985, and the museum opened in April 1993. The museum cost about \$220 million to build, with two-thirds coming from private funds. Ongoing financial support for the museum remains a joint responsibility of Congress and private fund-raising efforts. In addition to the permanent exhibit, the museum houses a research library, archives, a conference center, theaters and administrative offices, and maintains an extensive outreach program.

Technically, the USHMM is adjacent to, not on, the National Mall. But its leaders point with pride to the location and insist that the museum is part of the nation’s monumental core. The museum is situated between the neo-classical expanse of the Bureau of Printing and Engraving and the Victorian brick Auditor’s Building, and has a sight line to both the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial. Architect James Ingo Freed’s building design has won extensive praise for successfully translating the European Holocaust landscape into this monumental neighborhood. The museum’s towers, bridges, and steel straps mark it as a place apart, even as its limestone and brick exterior makes a gesture of incorporation into its American context. The hexagonal vaulted space of the “Hall of Remembrance” at the west end of the building anchors the double identity of the place as museum and memorial.

In the permanent exhibit at the heart of the museum, designers have used nearly 1,000 objects and a sophisticated combination of still photographs and media to create a careful, forensic narrative

of the Holocaust.<sup>9</sup> Survivors are witnesses here, and visitors become jurors. This is the evidence of the Shoah, the exhibit says. See and hear it for yourself. And do not forget! The core narrative documents the Nazi treatment of the Jews of Europe. Accounts of other victims of Nazi mass murder are placed in and around that core. Some of objects have become museum signatures: the pile of human shoes from the Majdanek concentration camp, the Polish boxcar, the iconic milk can from the Warsaw ghetto that contained the community's archives. A reproduction of the Stobierski miniature of the crematorium at Auschwitz anchors the last circle of hell, as the exhibition narrative descends to the Final Solution.

There is also an empty space in the exhibit—a place left for the nine kilos of human hair given to the USHMM by the State Museum at Auschwitz. Strenuous objections by some survivors and members of the museum staff caused the hair to be remanded to a warehouse in Maryland where it remains. It is “in limbo,” in historian Edward Linenthal's phrase. Its place in the exhibit is signaled by a photograph. This treatment of the hair of women who were victims reinforces an important observation Linenthal made about the intention of the permanent exhibit. He argues that the exhibit actually has two goals: it offers “*both* religious experience *and* intellectual argument.”<sup>10</sup> The meticulous historical narrative is joined here to the work of the sacred. The “Hall of Remembrance” at the end of the permanent exhibit reinforces the connection, as it provides visitors the opportunity to ritually remember the lessons of the narrative.

The challenges facing designers and planners at the USHMM were and are daunting. They include issues of *authenticity, representation, and inclusion*. What degree of authenticity can be claimed for each object, for each detail in the exhibit? Who speaks for which aspects of the memory? How are responsibilities for interpretation and policy-making allocated among survivors, museum professionals, and community representatives? Who and what gets represented in the museum and in

what location? What gets left out of the story? Among the omissions in the permanent exhibit are questions surrounding the Allied decision not to bomb concentration camps and rail lines during the war, the admission of Nazis to the United States after the war, and evidence that could lead to a nuanced understanding of the question of Christian complicity with the Nazis before and during the war. In the process of constructing an American memory of the Holocaust in this place, the omissions were as strategic as the inclusions. As Linenthal puts it, Jeshajahu Weinberg, the founding director of the museum, wanted “a straightforward narrative at the expense of ambiguity.”<sup>11</sup>

While the attention to historical authenticity is meticulous, “memory” remains the mission keyword at the USHMM. And the claim that memory in this place is “sacred” slips effortlessly into accounts of the museum.<sup>12</sup> The memories of survivors are the most important. Survivors have shaped both the contents and the narrative of the museum, and are a compelling presence as eye-witnesses in *Testimony*, a video production at the end of the permanent exhibit.<sup>13</sup> One survivor has been particularly notable: Elie Wiesel is the iconic image of the Holocaust in the U.S., and his views have deeply shaped the USHMM. He chaired both President Carter’s Holocaust Commission in 1979 and its successor, the Holocaust Council, until 1986, and he remains an active interpreter of the museum and its activities.

For Wiesel, the Holocaust was and is a sacred mystery.<sup>14</sup> He has insisted that the museum should be regarded as “a sacred institution, entrusted with containing and expressing the mystery of the Holocaust, a mystery available only through the witness of the survivors...”<sup>15</sup> Wiesel also used the idiom of the Temple to express his concerns. He has compared the museum to the invisible temple of a Talmudic story: “I’m always afraid ... that because of bureaucracy, because of the nature of things, because of the fact that we deal with prosaic matters, meetings, budgets, human relations, positions, honors, telephones .... somehow this vision of the temple ... occupying a space that is between one

world and another ... will disappear.” Wiesel reminded council members that “it is this temple that we are trying to bring [about] in Washington.”<sup>16</sup>

But the work of designing memory can impose its own logic, and historian Peter Novick argues that the effort to bring a Talmudic temple to Washington was a bad idea. In his critical appraisal of the role of Holocaust remembrance in American life, Novick argues that Holocaust museums tend to become “Catholic” spaces. “Judaism has consistently disparaged excessive or overly prolonged mourning,” he writes, and argues that Holocaust commemoration, particularly at museum sites, is “un-Jewish.” “I am thinking of the ritual of reverently following the structured pathways of the Holocaust in the major museums, which resembles nothing so much as the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa; the fetishized objects on display like so many fragments of the True Cross or shin bones of saints; the symbolic representations of the Holocaust—notably in the climax of Elie Wiesel’s *Night*—that employ crucifixion imagery. Perhaps most significantly, here is the way that suffering is sacralized and portrayed as the path to wisdom—the cult of the survivor as secular saint.”<sup>17</sup> Novick notes the attendant irony: the USHMM, with its heavily Christian iconography and practice, has become the “principal address” of American Jewry—the representation of Jewishness and the Jewish experience visited by more Americans than any other, and therefore a central emblem of Jewish identity and a major pilgrimage site.

Other critics who have noticed the “Catholic” aspects in the design of the permanent exhibit at the USHMM have been less apprehensive. *New Republic* editor Leon Wieseltier called the museum “a kind of reliquary.” “Here is the wooden frame of the ark that held the Torah scrolls in the synagogue at Essen, stabbed and scratched and scarred across the words that warned the worshiper to remember before Whom he stood, provoking now an almost Christian desire to touch the wound.”<sup>18</sup>

Wieseltier also judged the permanent exhibit to be “a pedagogical masterpiece.” In his view, it is particularly successful in using history to meet the challenge of constructing a Holocaust memory on the Mall. His reflections on memory and history are helpful here. Memory, he suggests, is a modern romance. It swept onstage in the twentieth century in reaction to the “costs of detachment” required by critical history, a science which “deposed the sacred” and made the past into an object for rational dissection. History lacked the vitality of memory and “failed to transmit the traditions it studied to the generations that awaited them.” Memory, in its contemporary romantic mode, promises to renew organic connections to the past, “to make genuine continuity possible.” He quotes historian Pierre Nora: “Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation .... History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer .... Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects .... At the heart of history is a critical discourse that is antithetical to spontaneous memory. History is perpetually suspicious of memory ...”

How, then, does USHMM harness history do the work of memory on the Mall? It brings the “precise pain” of survivors and the “painful precision” of scholars into the same place. “Without betraying its own methods, history approached memory’s proximity to its subject.” Like memory, history becomes “concrete” here—in the objects and narratives and in the building itself. And when the survivors are gone, and we are left with “a more customary, more distant, more mediated, more indirect relationship to the Holocaust,” memory will rely on “the fortifyings of history” present in this place. The memorial will benefit from “the intellectual heroism” of Holocaust historians, whose work

makes forgetting difficult and guards against the anesthetizing effect of too much memory and too many memorials.<sup>19</sup>

And at the National Museum of the American Indian? What fortifies memory and identity in that “different” place?

### **Stewarding the Sacred**

The sacred and its “stewardship” are key to the mission of the NMAI as it works to construct a common sense of native identity and to translate Indian Country to the National Mall. The museum’s founding director, W. Richard West, Jr., insists that the new museum is “about so much more than exhibitions” and that the museum is “more than a palace of objects.” “It has ceremonial, it has a quasi-sacred kind of connotations to it,” says West. “We’ve created a Native place.”<sup>20</sup>

The NMAI was authorized by Congress in 1989. Ground-breaking ceremonies took place in 1999, and the museum opened in September 2004. This museum is most definitely “on” the National Mall.<sup>21</sup> Its monumental entrance and Potomac Room face the National Capitol and the rising sun. Its neighbors include the National Air and Space museum and the Hirschhorn. And in contrast to the USHMM, the NMAI makes no architectural concessions to its neighborhood. Instead, it assertively transplants native America into the monumental core of national life. The 250,000 square foot building is sheathed in Minnesota limestone. Its dramatic curvilinear style mimics the effect of wind on natural surfaces, and the landscaping on the 4.25-acre site transplants ecological habitats, native crops, elements and orientations to the Mall.<sup>22</sup>

Like the USHMM, the NMAI project cost about \$220 million. The federal government contributed the site and \$119 million dollars, and private and corporate sources, including native communities and businesses, provided the rest.<sup>23</sup> Opening ceremonies in September 2004 were notable for the presence of 25,000 tribal representatives from all points in the Western hemisphere.

The Mitsitam (“Let’s Eat!”) Cafe at the NMAI quickly became a favorite of museum-goers in Washington, and the museum shop offers stunning pieces of native art.

Some 8,000 Native American objects are on display on the Mall. 800,000 additional objects are housed in the NMAI’s Cultural Resource Center (CRC) and storage facility in Suitland, Maryland, and much of the work of the museum goes on at the CRC.<sup>24</sup> The new Mall museum features some striking examples of contemporary Native American art, but most of the objects were collected early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Gustav Heye (1865-1957) of New York, who used his family’s oil fortune to acquire boxcar loads of Indian materials from North and South America and Europe. Heye’s acquisitions included human remains, funeral objects, and religious and ceremonial items, along with archeological materials and items of everyday life. The collection had been housed in the Heye Museum in the Bronx, and more recently in the Alexander Hamilton Customs House in Manhattan. The latter became part of the Smithsonian Institution in 1989. Some of the archeological objects date back 10,000 years, but most of the museum’s cultural objects date from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The museum also uses film, live performances and native guides to narrate and interpret the Indian experience.

The NMAI’s main exhibition space on the Mall is organized around three thematic “worldviews” that present impressions of the cosmologies and cultures of native peoples of the Americas. The *Our Universe* exhibit offers a reading of Native American cosmology ordered around the solar year and featuring topics like “creation and the order of the world,” and “the spiritual relationship between humankind and the natural world.” *Our Peoples* gives voice to native traditions, even as it challenges traditional forms of Western historiography and museum practice. When the exhibit addresses the European colonization of the Americas, for example, the history is represented metonymically by a wall of objects—gold, guns, and bibles. *Our Lives*, on the other hand, which

presents accounts of contemporary native communities, recognizes the influence of colonial and U. S. legal history, and notes that the question of native identity has been influenced by a legacy of (non-native) policies that have “sought to determine who is Indian and who is not.” The exhibit section offers alternative identity markers: “how you dress, what you think, where you fit in, and how you see yourself in the world.”<sup>25</sup>

The museum cultivates relationships with a host of tribal museums in the U.S., Canada and Mexico, and works to diminish the role of national political boundaries in its effort to both represent and revitalize Indian Country.<sup>26</sup> Its website indicates the range of goals in its outreach program—to “protect and foster indigenous cultures, reaffirm traditions and beliefs, encourage contemporary artistic expression, and provide a forum for Native values.”<sup>27</sup> In addition to renewing native traditions and developing effective forms of ownership and collaboration among its native constituents, the museum must conduct its business as a member institution in the Smithsonian complex.<sup>28</sup> The NMAI is responsible to the Smithsonian Board of Regents, as well as to its own Board of Trustees, and must meet responsibilities to the professional museum community, to federal regulatory agencies and to the larger public. The internal complexity of NMAI organization is equally notable. The museum houses Departments of Community Services, Public Programs, Exhibitions, and Cultural Resources. Its loan program, repatriation activities and public education programs constitute a “fourth museum”—in addition to the museum on the Mall, the Cultural Resources Center in Maryland, and the Customs Building in New York. In its efforts to meet its responsibilities and grow its base of support, the NMAI has pleased some observers and drawn criticism from others.

During the opening celebration on the Mall in fall of 2004, *Washington Post* commentator Joel Achenbach cheered the results and called the new NMAI “nothing short of revolutionary”—a museum “about, by and for” Indians. He interviewed several museum spokespersons who voiced

antagonism toward traditional anthropological approaches to native life, and Achenbach also noticed the absence of any discussion of the Bering Strait theory of native origins. He concluded that the issue of migratory origins was simply omitted from the museum because it “conflicts with the cosmologies of many native peoples, who believe they have occupied their lands since the beginning of time.”<sup>29</sup>

Culture critic Philip Kennicott (also from the *Washington Post*) enthused over those omissions. He called the new museum “a monument to Postmodernism—to a way of thinking that emphasizes multiple voices and playful forms of truth over the lazy acceptance of received wisdom, authority and scientific certainty.” There is, he said, a “dizzying Postmodern playfulness at work” at the NMAI.<sup>30</sup>

Other critics were notably less dizzyed. *New York Times* writer Edward Rothstein thought the museum “a great opportunity missed.” He concluded that the goal of creating a museum that could represent the traditions of so many native communities had forced the museum “to minimize difference even while it claimed to be discovering it.” Rothstein also decided that the museum’s “studious avoidance of scholarship” allowed an “astonishing uniformity in the exhibits’ accounts of religious beliefs.” The result, he concluded, is that “monotony sets in; every tribe is equal, and so is every idea.”<sup>31</sup>

And back at the *Washington Post*, Marc Fisher thought the museum felt like “a trade show in which each group of Indians gets space to sell its founding myth and favorite anecdotes of survival. Each room is a sales booth of its own, separate, out of context, gathered in a museum that adds to the balkanization of a society [the U.S.] that seems ever more ashamed of the unity and purpose that sustained it over two centuries.” Fisher actually blamed the USHMM for leading the way to this fragmentation: “The Holocaust Memorial Museum started us down this troubling path. A first-rate

endeavor with a rigorous, probing approach to history, the Holocaust... should nonetheless never have been given a spot near the Mall. Its location there opened the gate for the deconstruction of American history into ethnically separate stories told in separate buildings.”<sup>32</sup>

Behind the scenes reviewed by critics and central to the practice of the NMAI is the Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990. This statute placed the weight of federal law behind efforts to negotiate the status of human remains, funerary objects, and “ceremonial and sacred objects” in federally-funded museums. State legislatures have followed suit, triggering extensive attention to ancestral remains and ceremonial items in American museums. Concern to develop new protocols for the management of museum collections arose in response to the passage NAGPRA just as plans for the NMAI were getting under way.<sup>33</sup>

Even before the passage of NAGPRA, Smithsonian representatives had begun to return (or “repatriate”) human remains and ceremonial objects to communities of descent. And since the completion of the Cultural Resources Center in Maryland in 1999 and the transfer of the bulk of the Heye collection to that facility, interest in developing models for “the care and management of ‘the sacred’” has become a signature expression of the museum’s curatorial practice and community outreach. Tribal representatives are regularly invited to review the collections and participate in the repatriation decisions, and the museum has worked diligently to develop protocols for the care of objects that remain under their management.

This set of concerns at the NMAI anchored the two-year initiative at Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions mentioned above.<sup>34</sup> The publication resulting from that consultation, *Stewards of the Sacred*, reports on the care and display of “religiously-significant holdings” in several North American museums, and contains both personal testimony and policy guidelines for the treatment of sacred and “culturally sensitive” objects

by museums. NMAI representatives in the volume make it clear that the work of the sacred is a demanding discipline.

During the consultation, James Pepper Henry, the NMAI's chief repatriation officer, identified the challenges faced by the Smithsonian in light of NAGPRA, and offered a proposal designed to address those challenges.<sup>35</sup> Pepper discussed the requirements of NAGPRA and NMAI's attempts to construct a set of protocols to accomplish the intent of the law. He reviewed NMAI efforts to return "ancestral human remains and funerary objects" of native peoples to the communities of descent where possible, and to return "sacred and ceremonial objects and objects of cultural patrimony" in cases where the museum's title of ownership was unclear. He stressed the importance of tribal collaboration and visitation to review the collections and participate in the repatriation decisions.

But working with the sacred involves even greater challenges when the NMAI attempts to care for objects that remain in its facilities. Both professional curatorial practices and native protocols are on the table when the goal is "shared authority." In the Harvard consultation, Henry explained that the "physical preservation of an object is not synonymous with the preservation of its cultural integrity" and that accepted standards of professional practice may run afoul of tribal protocols. He gave the example of a native representative visiting the Cultural Resources Center, who informed the staff that traditional "warrior society items associated with his tribe should not be handled by any woman during her menstrual or 'moon' cycle." And that representative remembered exactly which items among the 800,000 at the CRS were involved. This kind of intervention is a sizeable challenge for the stewards of the sacred, and the "fortifyings of history" are not much help. On the one hand, there is the museum's baseline commitment to the proper treatment of sacred objects

according to traditional tribal requirements. On the other hand, there are the museum's own gender discrimination rules and standards for professional conduct—and the fact that a sizeable number of employees on the curatorial staff are women. Henry recognized that “an uneasy dilemma exists for the museum as it is caught between two mindsets ...”<sup>36</sup>

Henry went on to talk more specifically about the native views that shape the museum's efforts to share authority over its collections. He singled out “one consistent belief among diverse Native constituents”—the conviction that some of the objects in the collection are “living” or retain a “living spirit”: “These spirits are believed to be conscious beings with human-like emotions that, in some instances, require feeding and human interaction to remain “healthy.” Keeping these items healthy from a cultural context [sic] adds to the complexity of managing collections in an institutional setting.” Henry noted that many of the NMAI staff use the term “cultural risk” to describe “potential consequences for the culturally inappropriate care and handling of sensitive collections in the museum's possession.”<sup>37</sup> It seems that here the sacred is present *both* as an expression and as an experience. It represents the traditional self-understanding and present ambitions of native communities, even as (and perhaps because) it is treated by members of those communities as a potent presence.<sup>38</sup>

The requirements of NAGPRA and the implementation of the NMAI's commitments to renewing native culture present students of religion (and students of the First Amendment, I might add) with a new location in which to think about the work of the sacred.<sup>39</sup> James Pepper Henry's reflections indicate that boundaries are being redrawn at the NMAI (and elsewhere) as museum specialists try to develop practices designed to construct and care for the sacred in these new spaces—and the care of the sacred here entails ritual placement and ceremonial performance along with maintaining the vast collection of objects. Museum

director Richard West offered colleagues at the Harvard consultation his own reflection on these challenges. Objects represent the principle asset of the NMAI, he said, and they are “undeniably the chief cultural and spiritual currency of the Native peoples who made them and whose descendants are still among us.” Nonetheless, the object “was a secondary consideration to the primacy of the ceremonial or ritual process that led to its creation.” The process is more important in native understanding than the product.<sup>40</sup>

### **After the Tour**

The process of constructing and maintaining these two museums underscores the challenges presented by the work of “memory” and the “stewardship of the sacred.” At USHMM, the work of remembering has been grounded in the presence and testimonies of Holocaust survivors; at the NMAI, community memory is a primary resource for curating and displaying the “survivance” of native peoples. The tribal representatives who come to Washington to share in building exhibits and caring for the collections come as survivors. They also come as witnesses. They remember and reproduce the oral traditions and the ceremonial practices of their local cultures, and they contribute to the construction of a common American Indian identity, which they hope will revitalize native communities and re-establish native space in the Americas.

Both museums also engage in the language of the sacred. At the USHMM, that discourse is muted, acting as background rather than as marquee. The sacred is performed in the pilgrimages undertaken by visitors and invoked when matters of placement arise—as in the case of human remains, when the sacred works to put things out of bounds and off-limits—in “limbo” in a storage facility in Maryland, as with the nine kilos of human hair. At

the NMAI, the sacred is central to the enterprise in a much more programmatic and self-conscious way; but in both places, its use is challenging and complex.

David Chidester and Edward Linenthal and their colleagues are helpful here. In their reflections on the work of making and maintaining sacred space, they argue that the sacred is best understood as “situational” and that sacred space is always contested space. Borrowing from historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith, they stipulate that “place is sacralized as the result of the cultural labor of ritual, in specific historical situations,” and that this process always requires “hard work”—the work of attention, memory, design, construction and control of place. The “situational sacred” is always political. Battlefields and museums can be sacred places, and sacred places are (inevitably) battlefields. The “situational” and “contested” sacred is much in evidence in these two museums, as American Indians and American Jews struggle with issues of history, identity and hope.<sup>41</sup>

There are several other possibilities for bringing scholarship on religion into the museum context. By way of suggestion:

1/ Religion on the National Mall might be drafted to play a role in the ongoing analysis of American civil religion. Eric Mazur, for example, thinks that there is a new kind of civil religion growing up along the banks of the Potomac—a civil religion cut loose from its “Protestant” privileges and reshaped as the voice of the State. Assisted by the monumental and ritual expressions of national identity in Washington, Mazur argues, the federal government exhibits signs of becoming an “omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent authority” and “in many cases the final arbiter of right and wrong, life and death.”<sup>42</sup> Maybe so. But down along the Mall, the contest over representation, identity, conservation and display suggests that “the sacred” continues to be constructed in spaces and places that complicate

Mazur's scenario. As scholars of civil religion attempt to evaluate the erosion of Anglo-Protestant identity in American public life, they will want to keep their eyes on museums. And the work will become even more challenging with the addition to the mix of Smithsonian's newest museum—the Museum of African-American History and Culture.

2/ Scholars interested in method and theory in the study of religion can provide important resources for thinking about museums and religion. Jonathan Z. Smith's scholarship on place and his work on comparison provided the original stimulus for this paper, which also uses Smith's ideas about the processes of translation and re-description to think about what is involved in bringing the Holocaust to an American location and in re-creating "Indian Country" on the National Mall.<sup>43</sup>

3/ From the "museum" side, the study of religion can benefit from engagement with museum scholarship and practice. For instance, recent theories of religion put forward by Robert Orsi and Thomas Tweed might be tested and augmented by thinking about those theories in the context of emerging curatorial protocols and changing museum practices.<sup>44</sup> The work going on in museums also offers a renewed sense of the challenges facing students of religion who recognize the brilliance of Emile Durkheim's translation of the "sacred" into the "social." In these places, it is evident that neither the sacred nor the social is singular, and that translation moves in both directions. We will need the help of theorists skilled in the practice of analogy to sort out the implications here. And in the meantime, it would be interesting to know if totems were available for viewing in Paris museums when Durkheim was thinking through the "elementary forms of religious life."

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Crispin Paine, ed., *Godly Things: Museums, Objects and Religion* (London: Leicester University Press, 2000); and Mary Bouquet and Nuno Porto, eds., *Science, Magic and Religion: The Ritual Processes of Museum Magic* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005). Two recent collections give a sense of the history and development of museum studies: Bettina Messias Carbonell, ed., *Museum Studies: An Anthology of Contexts* (Malden: Blackwell, 2004); and Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum* (London: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Sullivan, "Sacred Objects and Sacred Knowledge in Museum Spaces," talk given at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University, 13 November 2003. Available on-line at: <http://www.hds.harvard.edu/cswr/resources/lectures/msullivan2.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence E. Sullivan and Alison Edwards, eds., *Stewards of the Sacred* (American Association of Museums, 2004). The issue of "stewardship" reappeared in August 2006 in a directive from the American Association of Art Museum Directors on "the stewardship and acquisition of sacred objects." The Report suggests that "there are works of art [in museum collections] that may require special care because of their meaning, significance, and function as sacred objects" (the Report can be downloaded from: <http://www.aamd.org/papers/>; accessed 30 October 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Edward Linenthal, *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum* (New York: Viking, 1995, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Jeshajahu Weinberg and Rina Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995): 26. For a more recent review of the museum by its former director of research, see Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know: The History of the Holocaust as Told in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum* (Washington, DC: USHMM, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Director West has been quoted to this effect in several sources. See, for example, Joel Achenbach, "Within These Walls, Science Yields to Stories," *Washington Post*, 19 September 2004, where Achenbach quotes West as saying "We do not want to make the National Museum of the American Indian into an Indian Holocaust Museum."

<sup>7</sup> Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 119.

<sup>8</sup> The observations in the paragraph echo the analysis of Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> The remainder of the collection (about 26,000 objects) is in storage in Maryland.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Linenthal, "The Boundaries of Memory: The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *American Quarterly* 46:3 (September 1994): 406-433 (quotation is on page 428).

<sup>11</sup> Linenthal, *Preserving Memory*, 216.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-237.

<sup>13</sup> The voices of survivors dominate planning discussions in Linenthal's account. He cites the remark of Holocaust historian and Council member, Raul Hilberg, that "one of the problematic 'rules' of Holocaust speech is that any survivor, no matter how inarticulate, is superior to the greatest Holocaust historian who did not share in the experience" (*ibid.*, 216).

<sup>14</sup> Linenthal speaks of the persistent concern of Wiesel and his supporters to make the permanent exhibit less didactic, more initiatory—a place "where the sacred mystery of the Holocaust could stamp itself on the visitor" (*ibid.*, 122).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4. See also Linenthal's more extended assessment of Wiesel's "long-standing public ambivalence" about the museum in the context of his Hasidic convictions, his fear of "trivializing the Holocaust," and his sense of commitment to the dead (136-37).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119. The issue of the inclusion of the Armenians in the permanent exhibit and controversy over what Linenthal calls "the hierarchy of victims" caused serious disagreement among Council members. Linenthal notes the "ambivalence" of survivors "regarding any connection between [Armenian genocide] and the Holocaust.... For those committed to a radical understanding of the uniqueness of the Holocaust—[namely] that *any* act of comparison dilutes the integrity of the memory of the Holocaust—locating the Armenian genocide in a historical narrative that led to the Holocaust was threatening" (236). The museum's director of research, Michael Berenbaum, was the leading opponent of Wiesel and his supporters on the question of Armenian inclusion (233-235). Likewise with the other victims of Nazi genocide: "Some Jews zealously guarded the story as *only* about the Jews," Linenthal writes, "and grudgingly allowed others to 'rent' space in the story because of the pluralistic imperative of a national museum" (249).

<sup>17</sup> Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 11.

<sup>18</sup> Leon Wieseltier, "After Memory," *New Republic* 208:18 (3 May 1993): 20. The museum's founding director, Jeshajahu Weinberg, also suggested that the museum intended to provide visitors with an "experience similar to that experienced by a believer in a holy place." In the permanent exhibition, he said, "people walking in silence together through the exhibition galleries, are confronted with the images of extreme human tragedy, [and they] undergo an experience similar to that of pilgrims walking together to a sacred place." See Weinberg and Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum*, 18-20.

<sup>19</sup> Wiesthaler, "After Memory," 18. For further reflections on the ascendancy of memory in contemporary theory and

practice, see Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 127-150; and Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (Spring-Summer 1995): 125-133. Alison Landsberg has addressed the problem of remembering and forgetting at the Holocaust museum by deploying a notion of "prosthetic memory." As the "past" moves further away with the death of each Holocaust survivor, she argues, the permanent exhibit at the USHMM must provide visitors with a "prosthetic memory"—must burn the memories of other people into viewers as they move through the exhibition experience. See her essay "America, the Holocaust, and the Mass Culture of Memory: Toward a Radical Politics of Empathy," *New German Critique* 71 (Spring-Summer 1997). For additional work on museums and Holocaust memory, see James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); "Toward a Received History of the Holocaust," *History and Theory* 36:4 (December 1997): 23-43; "America's Holocaust: Memory and the Politics of Identity," in Helen Flanzbaum, ed., *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); *At Memory's Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Oren Baruch Stier, "Virtual Memories: Mediating the Holocaust at the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Beit Hashoah-Museum of Tolerance," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4 (Winter 1996): 831-851; *Committed to Memory: Cultural Mediations of the Holocaust* (Amherst, Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); and "Different Trains: Holocaust Artifacts and the Ideologies of Remembrance," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19:1 (2005): 81-106.

<sup>20</sup> Amanda J. Cobb, "Interview with W. Richard West, Director, National Museum of the American Indian," *American Indian Quarterly* 29:3 (2005): 517-537. See also Cobb's own assessment of the museum in "The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty," *American Quarterly* 57:2 (June 2005): 485-506.

<sup>21</sup> See Douglas E. Evelyn, "A Most Beautiful Sight Presented Itself to My View," in Duane Blue Spruce, ed., *Spirit of a Native Place: Building of the National Museum of the American Indian* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Donna House, a Navajo ethnobotanist, had primary responsibility for creating the site. Patricia Leigh Brown, "A Native Spirit, Inside the Beltway," *New York Times*, 9 September 2004. Much of the early press attention to the museum dealt with the controversy surrounding the original museum architect, Douglas Cardinal. Cardinal, a Canadian of Blackfoot ancestry, won the commission to design the museum and produced the design concept that governed the eventual outcome on the ground. But in 1998, the museum terminated its contract with Cardinal for "failure to deliver the working and technical drawings" after a contract dispute. See, e.g., Patricia Leigh Brown, "Museum of the Indian Drops Its Designer," *New York Times*, 4 April 1998. The D.C. Commission on Fine Arts rejected the substitute plans for the museum in 1999, threatening further delays in the opening of the museum.

<sup>23</sup> Major donations came from three tribes that operate successful casinos: the Mashantucket Pequots, the Mohegans and the Oneida. Elizabeth Olson, "A Museum Of Indians That is Also For Them," *New York Times*, 19 August 2004.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Bob Thompson, "Spirit Lodge: The Indian Museum Storage Facility Feels Less Like a Warehouse and More Like a Home," *Washington Post*, 2 August 2004.

<sup>25</sup> See <http://www.nmai.si.edu/> (accessed 26 October 2007).

<sup>26</sup> The NMAI also attempts to act as a resource and "center" for the growing number of native community museums in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. One recent count lists two hundred of these. See Cooper, "Preface," in Cooper and Sandonal, eds., *Living Homes for Cultural Expression: Native American Perspectives on Creating Community Museums* (Washington, D.C.: NMAI/ Smithsonian Press, 2006): 8.

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.nmai.si.edu/> (accessed 26 October 2007).

<sup>28</sup> For a lively account of relations between the NMAI and the National Museum of Natural History (which also holds a large collection of native American materials), see Thompson, "Spirit Lodge."

<sup>29</sup> Joel Achenbach, "Within These Walls, Science Yields to Stories," *Washington Post*, 19 September 2004. For a recent assessment of constructions of "history" among Native Americans, see Peter Nabokov, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>30</sup> Philip Kennicott, "A Particular Kind of Truth: As the Culture Wars Rage, a Rare Victory Over Routes of Knowledge," *Washington Post*, 19 September 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Edward Rothstein, "Museum with An American Voice," *New York Times*, 21 September 2004.

<sup>32</sup> Marc Fisher, "Indian Museum's Appeal, Sadly, Only Skin-Deep," *Washington Post*, 21 September 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Native American Grave Protection and Repatriation Act, 25 U.S.C. 3001 et seq. 16 November 1990. For an extensive analysis by a religious studies scholar of the construction the legislation and its aftermath, see Greg Johnson, "Tradition, Authority and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act," *Religion* 32 (2002): 355-381; and "Naturally There: Discourses of Permanence in the Repatriation Context," *History of Religions* (2004): 36-55.

<sup>34</sup> See Sullivan and Edwards, *Stewards*, and Hugh Eakin, "Museums Set Guidelines."

<sup>35</sup> James Pepper Henry, "Challenges in Managing Culturally Sensitive Collections," in Sullivan and Edwards, *Stewarding*,

105-112. Henry is Associate Director for Community and Constituent Services at the NMAI's Cultural Resources Center. To address the task of repatriation, the NMAI drafted a set of protocols for the CSWR project. See "The National Museum of the American Indian Culturally Sensitive Collections Care Program" in *ibid.*, 129-153.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 108. There are additional challenges. For instance, "objects repatriated to native communities and individuals by museums for ceremonial use may pose potential human health hazards." These include DDT, Malathion, Diazanone; arsenic and mercury; IPM systems and Naphthalene (mothballs) (*ibid.*, 139). And according to at least one museum insider, some sacred objects need special accommodations in order to be able "to sing and dance at night." Elaine Heumann Gurian, "Singing and Dancing at Night," in *ibid.*, 89-96. Another notable issue in the museum's effort to share authority over sacred things with native constituents is the question of secrecy. See, e.g., Julia Klein, "Native Americans in Museums: Lost in Translation?" *APF Reporter* 19:4 (2001).

<sup>38</sup> This assertion intends an allusion to the compelling scholarship of Jonathan Z. Smith. In one recent essay, Smith identifies the choices scholars make "as to whether the sacred is best understood as an expression or an experience, as a representation or a presence." He sides with the view of the sacred as "representative" or "expressive" of the work of constructing and maintaining the human world. The native informants in this account would apparently refuse to choose between these two positions. Theirs seems to be a *both/and* approach. See Smith, "Topography of the Sacred," in *Relating Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 103.

<sup>39</sup> In 2006, the *New York Times* published a four-part series on tax breaks and exemptions available to religious organizations in the United States. Some of these benefits cover business activities engaged in by the religious organizations. The emerging concern for the care and protection of the sacred in publicly-funded museums described here offers another opportunity to analyze the changing boundaries of "church and state" in America. See Diana B. Henriques, "In God's Name: As Exemptions Grow, Religion Outweighs Regulation," *New York Times*, 8 October 2006.

<sup>40</sup> W. Richard West, Jr., "The National Museum of the American Indian: Steward of the Sacred," in Sullivan and Edwards, *Stewarding*, 7-18. A growing body of museum studies can be brought into the conversation about the relationship between (sacred) objects and place. See, e.g., Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), and "Topography of the Sacred." See also Arjun Appadurai, ed., Introduction to *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and Bill Brown, *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> See David Chidester and Edward Linenthal, eds., *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); and Edward Linenthal, *Sacred Grounds: Americans and their Battlefields* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

<sup>42</sup> Eric Mazur, "Washington, D.C.: Sacred Capital on the Banks of the Potomac," 2006 Proposal, North American Religious Group, AAR, Washington, D.C. And see Eric Michael Mazur, *The Americanization of Religious Minorities: Confronting the Constitutional Order* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> Smith, "Here, There, Anywhere," in *Relating Religion*, 326. J. Z. Smith's work also brings "place" and "objects" into the same conversation in powerful ways. One of these concerns the work of the dead. In his reflection on "domestic religion" (the religion of "here"), for instance, he offers a memorable reflection on "dis-location" and exile. He notices that the exile of human remains from their "homeplace" can create a "profound rupture of the presumed endless accessibility of the ancestors, which stands at the heart of domestic religion." This sounds like an argument for NAGPRA, but Smith is reflecting on the bones of Joseph in Genesis and Exodus. In Genesis, Joseph exacts a promise from the Israelites that after his death they will "take up my bones from this place" and return them home (Gen. 50:25). But instead they embalmed the body of Joseph and left it in a coffin in Egypt. Like repatriation officers in contemporary tribes and museums, it was left to Moses to carry out the promise and return the bones of Joseph to the "familial site." This reflection supports Smith's argument that, in the domestic and tribal religions which are "the most widespread form of religious activity," the dead are "an indispensable medium" of sacred transactions. They anchor sacred place and guarantee continuity.

<sup>44</sup> See Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), and Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).