Interpretation of Ecclesiastical Heritage: Where are we? What Next?

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ABSTRACT

This paper questions the applicability of the New Museology at European Christian churches, discussing the ontological incompatibility of plural and relative worldview of the postmodern cultural paradigm and religious realism. Following the analysis of various interpretations collected from the three prominent European denominations the paper concludes that the more content a denomination appears to be over the postmodern cultural paradigm of New Museology, the more likely it is to experiment with postmodern interpretative strategies. The paper moves one step forward elucidating this causal relationship should not be considered as a simple cause and effect relationship bound within a causal determinism. Considering that the heritage interpretation of religious settings is a multidimensional praxis the paper calls future researchers to be mindful of the multiple concurrent and contingent factors influencing interpretations at Christian churches.

Keywords: Religious heritage; Interpretation; Ontological plurality; New museology; Tensions

INTRODUCTION

The transformation of churches into cultural attractions alongside the 'secular' expectations of cultural tourism for entertainment and education elevates interpretation and presentation strategies at the core of the heritagization process [1-4]. Freeman Tilden envisaged interpretation as an educational activity [5], which has the ability to reveal, provoke and spark curiosity in an effort to enrich individual's understanding, enjoyment, and satisfaction [6,7]. Considering that one of the biggest threats to living religious sites is desacralization [8], interpretation as one of the two pillars of heritagization (alongside conservation) has a role to play in facilitating understanding and appreciation towards religious heritage as well safeguarding its tangible and intangible values. Despite this reciprocal relationship religious environments and interpretive planning have yet to co-exist. This paper contributes to an ongoing discussion around the heritagization of religious sites, highlighting the difficulty of applying museum theory in religious settings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the past two decades, and within the margins of heritagization and commodification of religious sites, the topic of interpretation and presentation of ecclesiastical heritage has been growing. This body of literature draws our attention to how informal learning, within religious settings, could meet the heterogenous needs and interests of religious tourism [3,9,10]. The research, predominantly quantitative in nature advanced two main research questions. The first, a search for individual's preferences and satisfaction of service and interpretative strategies [11-13], while the second concentrates on how visitors' demographics, interests and motivations, as well as cultural, religious and phycological profiles influence their preferences [9,14-17] In addition to the aforementioned, literature, a small amount of qualitive research discussed the importance of providing interpretations which could spark both visitors' affective and cognitive aspects. In this, we encounter scholars such as Voase's [18] study at the Lincoln cathedral where he concluded that visitors require interpretations which will provide a romantic and emotional experience emphasizing secular topics such as artwork. Other interesting studies include Tucker's and Carnegie's study [19] discussing how contested interpretations are communicated to the public and Francis et al. [20] study searching how phycological profiles influence visitors' preferences. Both studies advocated the importance of pluralistic interpretations which can embrace alternative narratives as well

as interpretations which will provoke both the emotive and cognitive aspects of their visitors.

The question, remaining unanswered, is how such blending (secular and religious information) can be achieved. In this account it has been noted that the research overlooks methodological difficulties in balancing materiality and spirituality [21]. In other words, how a holistic interpretation can satisfy a heterogeneous audience. It is evident that the discussion around ecclesiastical heritage interpretation has concentrated around 'what' questions, what information/themes should be presented, what people are interested in, what is considered as appropriate interpretation. The 'how' questions, how a balanced, provocative and informative interpretation can be achieved, how informal (secular) learning in religious settings could engage visitors in diverse, provocative and potentially critical ways, and most importantly how religious information are presented to a non-religious audience and vice versa has received less attention. This research gap has resulted in scholars overlooking the meticulous process of crafting interpretations for religious tourism audience. On this line of thought, the author found that there is a lack of research focusing on finding the appropriate interpretative framework (both theory and practice) which will assist practitioners to achieve a holistic, deep and provocative interpretation at religious settings. This is further supported by the absence of studies analysing the interpretations provided at religious sites as well as studies considering the applicability of New Museology in religious settings. Considering this gap, this short commentary discusses the result of a recently published article in the journal 'Religions', addressing the different interpretive strategies adopted by the three major European Christian denominations, while it provides further comments on how this study can serve as a base for the design and development of future research in the field of ecclesiastical heritage interpretation.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research analysed a number of primary sources including *in situ* labels and panels, guidebooks and audio guides collected between 2017-2019 form ten Anglican Churches, two Catholic Churches and a cluster of ten Orthodox churches. The interpretations were examined following thematic analysis [22]. The research was interested in finding how popular the postmodern cultural paradigm is in ecclesiastical heritage interpretation. For this purpose, the deductive approach, or theoretical according to Braun and Clark driven by researchers' theoretical interest, was found to be a more appropriate strategy. Hence, the coding process focused on how modern and postmodern strategies (welcoming critical and active engagement) played out across the data. A flexible, pre-existing coding frame was applied with codes such as 'transmission' and 'consensus' referring to instances when the presentation of religious information took place in a linear transmission model, characterized by a strong curatorial voice. On the other hand, codes such as 'contestation' and 'critical engagement' referred to instances when interpretation utilizes religious references in an engaging way to spark further interest and provoke the reader to consider religion in its broader spiritual, social and cultural context. The research identified three concurrent themes/paradigms (a) Deficiency of religious references (b) Modernist interpretational strategy and (c) Postmodern interpretational strategy.

RESULTS

The first paradigm is characterized by a complete lack of religious references. In these instances, religious information (scriptural, theological, liturgical, etc.) is almost entirely absent from the educational programs. This model calls for linear narratives, prioritising historical facts, over a holistic analysis of religious material culture, with religious references either absent or expressed as a reference of identification for the presented figures. This paradigm is evident in all denominations (although more prominent in Orthodox churches) and as Vaose [18] argued secular in nature interpretations (endorsing the aesthetic value of the place), may restrict visitors' ability to engage emotionally with the spirit of the place, undermining the sense of human connectedness. In the second paradigm, while religious references are still scarce, they are mostly utilized as the 'illustrative component' of religious art. However, the strong curatorial voice is still evident in this (modernist) paradigm, which restricts visitors' critical engagement with the interpretation. These interpretations retain the 'factual' and 'absolute' conceptual framework of modern strategies and are more evident in the Catholic and Protestant Churches. Lastly, in the third paradigm (evident in some Protestant churches) theology is utilized not just as an 'illustrative' component of religious art, but as an emotive and cognitive stimulant provoking the visitor to imagine the space as a place of reflection and inspiration.

Following a latent analysis going beyond the semantic content of the data [22], the research tried identifying the features (underlying ideas, assumptions and ideologies) that gave rise to the three paradigms. In this context, the study sought to investigate the converging and diverging points between the theoretical underpinning of New Museology and the 'religious cultural paradigm' (encompassing religious cosmological understanding). New Museology underpinned by hermeneutic philosophy, advocating for meaning that is always context dependent, shifting and influenced by sociocultural interaction Ablett et al. [23] and the postmodern cultural paradigm underscoring a world which is irreducibly and irrevocably pluralistic Bauman [24] aimed at democratizing the museum space creating visitors-centred interpretations. On the other hand, the three denominations take different stances towards postmodernism and hermeneutic philosophy. Orthodoxy and Catholicism have long expressed their discontent towards postmodernism, which is often approached with scepticism and apprehension as relative ontologies would unacceptably pluralise knowledge into a multiplicity of incommensurable positions [25], creating a 'plethora of pseudo-realities' [26]. On a different train of thought, Protestantism's embracement of the ideals of humanism and critical judgment, has embraced Christian and ancient secular philosophy, empowering the individual to be critical and think for themselves [27]. This critical and personal approach to God is still evident in Anglican society in which secularization has taken hold since 1960s, with Anglican

churches having become pluralistic both in doctrinal and ethical matters [28].

Although the investigation into this area is still ongoing, the study has shown that the interpretative strategies encountered in the three denominations revealed a reciprocal relationship between religious tradition and the current postmodern curatorial practices. In this model, the article pointed towards the idea that the conservatism of a Christian denomination in adapting the New Museological practices is the result of how congenial a denomination is towards the 'ethics of the dominant postmodern cultural paradigm. Thus, the more a denomination shows evidence of adaptability to the postmodern cultural paradigm, claiming for polysemy and plurality, the more flexible it appears to be in experimenting with New Muse logical practices in conveying the intended messages. A possible explanation for their aforementioned causality may be the difficulty of postmodern curatorial philosophy to gain ground in religious settings. On the contrary the prevalence of modernist heritage strategies characterized by a strong curatorial voice has the ability to ease alternative interpretations. Thus, the article raised the question of whether the 'ethics of the postmodern cultural paradigm advocated by 'New Museology' are considered suitable in ecclesiastical settings.

DISCUSSION

The paper introduces a discussion surrounding the compatibility of New Museology and religious realism. Examining the different interpretative strategies encountered in Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant churches the author suggested that a causal relationship between a particular's denomination worldviews and the selected interpretive strategies exist. This assumption is in line with Harrison's notion of ontological plurality 'that different forms of heritage practices enact different realities and hence work to assemble different futures' [29]. Thus, although the researcher sees the educational advantages of postmodern interpretive strategies, he is sceptical over its application in religious settings, as the experimental space that is given for true meaning making is limited. In this vein the paper implicitly raises the question of what paradigm the religious heritage interpretation could be construed upon, in a world characterized by polysemy.

The results of this research need to be interpreted with caution. The effects the ontological presuppositions of secular and religious stakeholders have on ecclesiastical heritage interpretation, should not be considered deterministic, bound in a causal determinism of a simple cause and effect relationship. That is to say, there are many unobservable conflicting discourses between various social actors and social structures involved on different levels. In this context, stakeholders' ontological presuppositions should not be considered as the only catalyst of how religious history, tradition, and faith, are negotiated, and presented in religious settings. The interpretation of Christian church takes place in in a non-structed way. Due to the presence of countervailing mechanisms, such as untrained professional clergy lacking knowledge of modern management trends ,or 'the politics of recognition' [30] referring to the rights to control expressions of

cultural identity, as well as other contingent circumstances such as world heritage designation, discussions around the interpretation of religious sites will be benefited from a non-deterministic and non-reductionist understanding of the constantly renegotiated notion of heritage interpretation. In this frame of reference in order to examine the underlying issues involved in interpreting ecclesiastical heritage, the context (varying between countries, rural and urban churches and denominations) is of particular importance since various concurrent conditions and contextual factors reinforce, counteract or mitigate other mechanisms. In this context, the aim of future researchers investigating the interpretive strategies at religious sites should focus on building a picture of the various complex interactions between involved parties whose interplay is dependent on contingent conditions [31].

CONCLUSION

Despite its prominence in museums and other secular heritage sites the last three decades, the postmodern cultural paradigm has not infiltrated religious settings with the same success. The growing attention given to religious sites from devoted pilgrims as well as those who belong, but they do not believe constitute ecclesiastical heritage interpretation an essential tool in providing a fulfilling, emotional and cognitive experience. If religious stakeholders find it hard to re-negotiate the meanings of their cherished churches under the flag of plurality and relativity, then what is coming next? How can we reach Tilden's ideal of a revelatory and provocative interpretation while respecting alternative worldviews and theological concerns? How can we re-address the way in which such sites are developed and subsequently interpreted. Although, the dissonance occurring at religious sites to a large extent is a result of the spiritual and moral positions of Christian denominations, the real answer to this equation should be sought in the broader structures and mechanisms involved in this process and the contingent conditions shaping the interpretive strategies at religious settings.

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