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Christianity on Display: An Introductory Note

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When considering the display of things an immediate reaction is that this is something that is done at a museum, an art gallery or at a shopping centre. At such locations things are shown to the world with a purpose to inform, attract possible buyers, cause people to reflect on their lives and the world we live in and so on. However, display is a seemingly inescapable aspect of human engagement with the world of things, not restricted to peculiar kinds of organised, professional, presentations. It is an omnipresent feature woven into the very fabric of our everyday lives. We frequently, and sometimes routinely, engage in acts of display. Why is that?

A brief and much too simplistic answer points in the direction of subjectivity and its aesthetical trappings. The significance we put into things is presented to the wider world through conscious or unconscious acts of display. Consider, for example, how we organise the material world of our living rooms: these are spaces that we pack with furniture that are supposed to fulfil certain functions, but also with things that we imbue with meaning. Our selection and arrangement of these things is dependent on cultural norms, our individual sense of the beautiful or appealing but also on our self-understanding. Thus, the display of mundane objects can become idealised reflections of our life-stories, habits and aspirations; an image that is shown to the occasional visitor, but also reflected, as a reaffirmation, to ourselves. These arrangements may eventually become part of an unnoticed background, but they are still there with a potential to offer meaning and reassurance – that is, until we remake our worlds and reorder our things.

Display is a rich theoretical construct which cannot fully be explored in this brief introductory note. A few general remarks will provide context

for the articles included in this themed issue. First, the concept of display refers to a set of spatial practices that involve intentionally placing objects in their 'right place' and attaching meaning to these arrangements. Yet the concept of display is not only about the 'sender side'. This takes us to our second point. Display cannot be reduced to the actions and the intentions of the person who arranges particular objects. Inspired by contemporary socio-material theory, we can also focus on the ways in which the material world realises a meaning of its own, beyond our own intentions. Even when things are in their 'right place', they have a certain amount of agency. Furthermore, those encountering our living rooms may grasp certain aspects of our display of things, certain intended meanings always get through, but we can be quite confident that our guests make alternative interpretations of our everyday material worlds. Their world of associations is different from ours, and our spatial-material realm can trigger a different set of reactions than the intended.

Finally, display is often built into the very process of manufacture. Choices of material and design are often influenced by a conscious desire to say something to the world; things cry out to be displayed, so to say. A rich repertoire of familiar symbols is used for this very purpose. The ability to decipher the message built into the object by the maker/sender, rests of course on a sufficient amount of shared knowledge. A display of things may therefore be a way to rehearse these common symbols and representations. But, of course, the symbols built into the material world change meaning during the lifespan of an object and may eventually be forgotten; such transformations open for a different kind of display, or perhaps better, display within a different setting. Moreover, for many (most?) things the manufacturer has a clear idea about their ideal placement. This spatial context contributes to people's ability to comprehend the intended meaning of a certain thing. Consequently, if an object is placed in the 'wrong' location, its intended meaning may be distorted. Yet displacement may also end in an imaginative intertextual play of symbols. New meanings can emerge as a result of an act of display at an unforeseen location, a process that effects both thing and place. What happens, for example, when an Orthodox icon is integrated into our living-room furnishings?

Within the realm of religion, display takes many forms. In many religious traditions, the homes of believers become an important arena for display of things, as do their own bodies. Display is related to devotional practices but may also, for example, be intertwined with collective identity formation and religious socialisation. Many of the things that have been stated above about our everyday acts of display are to a surprising extent also app-

licable for religious organisations and communities of faith. Furthermore, display remains a salient feature of many ritual practices, and the placement and design of buildings designated for religious purposes remains a pivotal form of self-expression in relation to what is perceived as an outside world. Material religion displayed in public spaces can even become bids in a struggle for power.[1]

If we turn our attention to the academic field of the History of Christianity, there is today a rapidly increasing amount of studies heavily influenced by the recent 'material turn'.[2] Materiality as a dimension of the history of Christianity is today studied from a variety of perspectives, yet, save a few studies of ecclesiastical contributions to public exhibitions of various kinds, the concept of display has rarely been touched upon.[3] The articles included in this themed issue thus make an important contribution to an expanding field by exploring some dimensions of historical material display as performed by Christian denominations, institutions and groups of believers. Early versions of these articles were first presented at a conference at Lund University in September 2022 that was generously financed by the by The Royal Swedish Academy of Letters, History and Antiquities and the Pleijel Foundation.

This selection of studies begins with the contributions from two of the keynote speakers invited to the conference. In his contribution, Anders Jarlert explores the religious materiality on display in an archive, Lund University Ecclesiastical History Archive (LUKA), but he also examines how materiality was a subject that was touched upon already in the oral history accounts gathered under the auspices of professor Hilding Pleijel (1893–1988) in the 1940s. William Christian Jr. turns his attention to the material world of a family in the contemporary US. In his minute examination their everyday material surroundings assumes the guise of a habitat, haunted by

1 Sally M. Promey, *Religion in Plain View: Public Aesthetics of American Display*, Chicago 2024.

2 See for example Joachim Grage, Thomas Mohnike & Lena Rohrbach (eds.), *Aesthetics of Protestantism in Northern Europe: Exploring the Field*, Turnhout 2022; Jan De Maeyer & Peter Jan Margry (eds.), *Material Change: The Impact of Reform and Modernity on Material Religion in North-West Europe, 1780–1920*, Leuven 2021; Christopher Ocker & Susanna Elm (eds.), *Material Christianity: Western Religion and the Agency of Things*, Cham 2020; Minna Opas & Anna Haapalainen (eds.), *Christianity and the Limits of Materiality,* London 2017.

3 Roeland Hermans, *Civitas dei: De kerk op Expo 58*, Leuven 2008; Charlotte Hylten-Cavallius, "Exhibiting Religion – Displaying Religious Heritage in Postsecular Sweden", *Scandinavian Studies* 90:3 (2018) 403–35; Julie Nicoletta, "Selling Spirituality and Spectacle: Religious Pavilions at the New York World's Fair of 1964–65", *Buildings and Landscapes* 22:2 (2015), 62–88; Lena Liepe, *A Case for the Middle Ages: The Public Display of Medieval Church Art in Sweden 1847–1943*, Stockholm 2018; Martin Wörner, *Religionen auf den Weltausstellungen*, Hannover 2000.

the spirits of the past, that step-by-step ensnares its inhabitants. Agency is, so to say, reversed in this case. In the end, it is the things put on display that hold the displayers captive. Elwin Hofman's and Tine Van Osselaer's article explores an institutional and practical theological setting. They focus on how visual aids were used to prepare the deaf for confession within eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Roman Catholicism. Even though never uncontroversial, pictorial representation became an effective means to introduce this group of people to central spiritual practices.

Leonardo Rossi continues the exploration of the material world of modern Roman Catholicism. His article focuses on the process through which the material remains of the saintly person turns into an "incorruptible body" put on display within liturgical space. Rossi's study thereby becomes a comment on the distinction between thing and living body. Display in connection with the organisation of liturgical space is a theme that returns in Janice Holmes' contribution. Holmes explores a series of changes in the sanctuary paintings found in Protestant free church chapels in the historical province Dalarna in central Sweden. The writer argues for a gradual transformation that reflects the changing social/political ambitions of the congregations themselves.

The two final studies included in this volume address the overtly political dimensions the display of material religion can attain. Both articles focus on expressions of nationalism in relation to a religious material world. Emil Saggau turns his attention to the interconnection between place-making, materiality and re-invented religious practices in recent Montenegrin politics. John Wolffe concludes this issue with a study of how religious, personal, national and military symbols are woven into the material fabric of commemoration at Belgian and French war cemeteries. ▲