Religion, identity, and modern institutions: a reflection on two examples in the Muslim world

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Abstract This article is a study on cultural diversity, identity, and modern institutions in relation to Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. The study focuses on two distinct examples: the cultural genocide carried out by the terrorist non-state actor known as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the new Moroccan cultural projects of modernizing the national museums. The article aims to show that while ISIS strives to eradicate all forms of cultural and religious diversities in the region through destroying cultural property, Morocco is engaged in democratizing cultural diversity and promoting religious tolerance through the modern institution of the museum. The study also aims to explain that the act of destroying cultural property by ISIS has many motives other than the iconoclastic ideology of this terrorist insurgency. With regard to issues surrounding religious items in museums and the concept of ritual, this study shows that such cultural genocide is a mechanism through which the members of ISIS aim to construct an idealized and fixed identity that is based on pure theological input. This is a step towards the establishment of a Caliphate state where cultural diversity, freedom of belief, modernity, and modern institutions are intolerable.

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The material culture of ancient civilizations is a shared heritage that is essential to humanity. Ancient and present material culture embodies memory, history, and identity. It also represents tangible data basic to the systematic study of the patterns of human behavior, thought, psychology, spirituality, cultural experiences, and development through history. Ancient religious items and liturgical sites are significant parts of human existence and history, similar to any other forms of self or group expression of our ancestors. Various forms of materializing faith and spirituality in the ancestral past such as idolatry items, manuscripts, architecture, and art are living sources for research and theory on how societies and civilizations make sense of a local or universal human condition, both synchronically and diachronically. This cultural heritage has an essential role in reconstructing identities; it helps promote inter-cultural dialogue, mutual understanding, and tolerance among the peoples of the world.

Thanks to local and international governmental and non-governmental cultural organizations like the United Nation Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM), this tangible cultural heritage is protected, collected, conserved, documented, and interpreted. However, a substantial part of this
universal patrimony has constantly been compromised because of other human institutions and is, therefore, susceptible to damage or censorship for religious, political, and economic reasons. During wars and ethnic conflicts, opposing claims of religious, political, ethnic, economic, or cultural nature can legitimize inappropriate action over this universal patrimony, such as the destruction of items or their smuggling in the black market. In many cases, these conflicts not only eradicate a shared heritage that is important to a constantly developing universal community of individuals, groups, researchers, and academics, but they also efface a living human memory locally and internationally. Cultural heritage looting and trafficking by the Nazis or the Soviet Union during World War II, the destruction of Bamiyan Bhuddas in Afghanistan in 2001, and the sabotaging of El Farouk monument in Timbuktu in 2012 and 2013 are some of the examples to cite.

**ISIS and cultural property**
Since the rise of the terrorist organization ISIS, many archaeological artefacts, millennial historical sites, monumental buildings, temples, cultural relics, museums, and libraries in Syria and Iraq have been entirely destroyed or partly damaged. ISIS has blown up the ancient city of Palmyra, Museum Ma’arrat al-Numan, the historical site of Nimrud, the ancient Assyrian capital, the ancient city of Hatra, the citadel of Tal afar, Mosul and Nivine museums, the Temple of Baalshamin, the funerary towers in the Valley of Tombs, the ancient Roman Triumphant Arch, and many others. Not only has ISIS destroyed ancient liturgical sites and items, but it has also targeted the living religious items and shrines of other sects in the region. This raises many questions about the motives behind this behavior. Religion, fundamentalism, politics, modernity, secularism, iconography, culture, and identity are all key concepts relevant to the understanding of this act. The pre-Islamic spiritual items and temples in Iraq and Syria may be more provocative to ISIS, based on the religious beliefs of this terrorist insurgency. Yet, the act of destroying these riches has other underlying messages to the world; it is an indirect threat to other values of modern societies and to modern institutions, such as the museum.

**Idolatry items in museums?**
The act of displaying the Pisa Griffin statue in the temporary exhibition *Medieval Morocco: an Empire from Africa to Spain*,¹ united the aesthetic, ethnographic, anthropological, mythical, religious, and historical in a context that suggested specific ways of perception and interpretation, namely, the museum. The exhibition that was held at the first national museum of modern and contemporary art in the capital of Morocco displayed the golden age of Islam in Spain and North Africa; it represented Islam as a central and unifying spiritual, cultural, and social institution that has enriched a civilization and inspired culture, science, literature, architecture, and arts in many successive Islamic dynasties. The display of the Pisa Griffin in this exhibition might suggest a history of cross-cultural interactions (namely, that of Islam and Latin Europe in the middle ages) to convey specific implications of a contemporary culture and identity.

For the religious fundamentalist, the display of this artefact is an act of blasphemy or *Shirk* (polytheism) since it officially associates objects with divine authority or indirectly supports idolatry, regardless of the history, historicity, context, or representation of the artefact. The exhibition did not aim at displaying or explaining Islam as a faith in its own right, nor did it include discussions about its ontology or historicity. Still, many questions about the nature...
of the exhibition and the selected collection can be raised. How did displaying Islamic historical culture and civilization in medieval Morocco relate to the history of a modern community and its present spiritual and cultural experience? How did the exhibition and its religious theme relate to the institution of the museum itself?

Islam in this exhibition was indirectly represented as an absolute and an ultimate frame of reference of a culture that has co-existed in a world of diversity. The ontology of Islam was not meant to be contested by means of displaying a zoomorphic mythical statue, an ancient non-Islamic liturgical entity, or a living sacred item that belonged to any other religion. Nevertheless, the issue of displaying the sacred in a museum has always been subject to discussions and studies. How do different museums (anthropology, art, or history museums) influence the display of material religious items and how do they relate to their spiritual dimension? Would a comparative spiritual exhibition be considered nihilistic since it equates the differing religious views and lays them all under objective scrutiny? What implications would a chronological, diachronic form of display yield? Would it deconstruct a given religious discourse and make specific constructs subjective, relative, contextual, and questionable through the comparative display of votive and religious items of different civilizations throughout human history? How would chronology and historicity affect the displays? Would an exhibition create a neutral frame of comparison and analysis that fixes the present absolutes under the gaze of a detached viewer? Would it make the displayed objects subject to liberal public debate in a modern secular institution? How does the modern secular institution function in a Muslim state? Would it paradoxically function as a normative space that reinforces and promotes given socio-cultural and political constructs? Is it a space of control? Carol Duncan notes that “To control a museum is to control the representation of the highest values and most authoritative truths of a community.” (1996) Is museum destruction yet another strategy to escape controlled narratives and reconstruct new values and truths? How do museums account for and affect ancient and living religious objects? Do religious displays transform museums into spaces of worship?

Displaying a tolerant and flourishing Islamic civilization along five centuries in the Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts might recall the current situation of the material cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq, and evoke images of vandalism, destruction, pillage, eradication, loss, and decline. At present, the global museal community theorizes the dynamics of exhibiting ancient and present religious objects in museums, and highlights their importance in the understanding of an essential part of human history and development in a globalized world. On the other side, the militant fundamentalist organization ISIS limits these antiquity items to an obsolete spiritual dimension per se, and refutes their cultural, archaeological, ethnographic, scientific, and aesthetic significance. It denies the diachronic historical value they acquire through history, and it dismisses the process of institutionalization as embedded in modern societies. The ideology of this fundamentalist movement is based on the Islamic iconoclastic perspective that refuses any spiritual anthropomorphic items, mythical material representations, and anthropological fetishes that served as worship idols in the pre-Islamic history. However, the present destructive strategies carried out in regions under radical Islamist rule function within a different context and historical period and have other purposes. Within this destructive movement, mainstream history and historicity are both eliminated. The question of whether any polytheistic fetishes are yet functional is not worth considering as
long as these items are set outside history and denied the paradigms of knowledge and institutions that give them new meanings and significance in modern societies. (Foucault 1986) Displayed in museums of religion, ethnography, archaeology, history, or art, ancient religious items, once functional in ancestral civilizations, still maintain their identity as religious artefacts, and yet they emanate other meanings and dimensions related to human history, thought, and behavior.

In museums, religious items are represented and interpreted in a modern and secular space that is descriptive of their identity and significance in ancient societies. An exhibition simulation of the original context of these items does not aim at creating a sacred environment of worship that revives the rituals and religious practices of the past. Still, the terrorist organization ISIS adopts a different perspective on the socio-cultural and political dimensions of various spiritual and cultural practices in human history. ISIS, like any fundamental Islamic political ideology “insists upon the return to the ‘ideal’ customs of seventh-century Arab desert tribes and considers everything ‘added’ since the prophet’s time to be a foreign perversion-including all scientific and cultural achievements.” (Mernissi 2003).

Based on their radical Islamist views, the ancient devotional and liturgical objects that a museum hosts, regardless of their context or historical significance, are yet inaccessible, functional, controversial, and provocative. Here, neither the museum nor its principles and concepts apply. The museum is not only rejected because of its apparent function as a temple and sanctuary for controversial idolatry artefacts, for ISIS, but it is also intolerable since it is seen as a Western modern institution that contradicts the principles of a fundamentalist Islamic society. The main issue with this institution is that it functions as an intrusive political and secular ideology of the West. In other words, the museum has invaded non-Western societies during Western imperialism and has continued to threaten an essentialist religious-cultural identity. The practice of displaying religion in museums or displaying art in religious institutions, the secular nature of the museum in its own right, the fact of equating art museums to liturgical institutions often, and the transformation of religious buildings into museums in some societies are all seen as Western museological practices that abate religion, subdue it to the authority of human institutions, and make it vulnerable to Western paradigms of thought, theories, and study disciplines like historicity, historical archaeology, anthropology, epistemological nihilism, and many others. Hence, the musealization of ancient or living religious items is not a possibility to account for these objects within a different context and historical frame relevant to discovery, scientific research, and study. For ISIS, the museum does not provide a conceptual space of negotiation where sacred living objects are taken as material artefacts to initiate and promote inter-cultural dialogues, mutual understanding, and religious tolerance. De-contextualization, re-contextualization, codification, and historicity are not taken into consideration since the very institution (the museum that relates these notions and assigns new meanings to ancient or present religious objects by means of controlled physical and conceptual space while maintaining their very identity) is denied. Museology, curatorial control, the idea of the museum itself, and a whole culture and body of knowledge disciplines on humanities in modern societies are all nullified.
Building the Caliphate State: destroying the past and the modern present

The refusal of Western culture does not in itself constitute a culture, and the delirious roaming around the lost self shall never stir it up from dust.
(Laroui 1967)

Building the Caliphate State means the construction of an idealized identity that rises on the destruction of other cultures and the denial of modern world social, cultural, and political institutions. The freedom of belief, cultural diversity, and modernity are also denied by ISIS in their promised Caliphate state. ISIS is not targeting pre-Islamic idolatry and pagan artefacts per se. The members of this terrorist insurgency have been involved in religious, sectarian, and ethnic cleansing. They have attacked the Yazidis, Assyrians, Armenian Christians, Jews, Coptic Christians, Kurds, Druze, and Shiites in the region, and they have destroyed their living religious items, shrines, mosques, and churches. ISIS eradicates any other religious or spiritual belief other than Salafi Sunni Islam. This is a substantial part of a wider political activism to build a state where one religion functions as the only cultural and political institution of social control and organization. ISIS also aims to establish a rupture with the modern Western and non-Western world. It fights against any intrusive modern, westernized, or Western values since it intends to recover and institutionalize fundamental religious laws and apply them to all aspects of life in the modern world. This is mostly embodied in the establishment of an ahistorical radical cultural paradigm that denies modern world institutions and refuses knowledge disciplines that they see as a threat to their identity. For instance, as Kristen Romey noted in a National Geographic article on April 14, 2015, this terrorist insurgency sees the practice of Archaeology as a foreign import that impedes their goal of building their Caliphate mono-cultural and monotheistic state. According to ISIS, the infidels had unearthed pagan idolatry items in recent generations and tried to portray them as part of a cultural heritage and identity of which the Muslims of Iraq should be proud. So, like archaeology, the museum will always be a target in the Caliphate state since it stands as a secular democratic space that hosts the archaeological findings, preserves, and displays them to the public. Here, the museums serve as mnemonic social actors that revive, protect, and promote the collective memories, histories, and national identities that ISIS strives to efface. Also, museums materialize a Western modern practice and represent the Western notion of democracy and secularism.

Paradoxically, smuggling antique artefacts of pillaged museums and those excavated in historical and archaeological sites is one of the economic strategies used to finance the long-term and ultimate project of upgrading this terrorist organization to a state where sects, religious minorities, cultural diversity, scientific and social disciplines, and modernity are not tolerated. Further, the destruction of museums, valuable antiquity objects, and historical sites is a clear statement that archaeological research and any other related fields of study are all heretical, unacceptable, futile, and limited in scope and perspective compared to divine knowledge. It limits knowledge systems of humanities and sciences to a radical version of religion that would by no means contain a constantly changing and intercultural modern world nor be adequate to face the potential challenges and necessities of its development, evolution, and interactions.
The Moroccan experience: celebrating a unique plural identity and a hybrid history in the modern museum

Only by risking a plural form of thinking (that cuts across several civilizations, several languages, several technical and scientific elaborations) can we safely navigate on a global scale.
(Khatibi 1983).

In 2011, King Mohammed VI created the National Foundation of Museums (NFM). The NFM has launched promising cultural projects that revolutionized the museal landscape in Morocco. Fourteen national museums of anthropology and archaeology witnessed substantial changes in the course of democratizing access to culture, and the first national museum of modern and contemporary art was inaugurated in 2014. One of the major purposes of these museums is to preserve, define, represent, and narrate the richness and hybrid nature of Moroccan history, culture, and identity. In PATRIMOINE SANS FRONTIERS on April 22, 2015, Mehdi Qotbi, president of the NFM, noted that one of the principal objectives of the foundation is to bring the national Moroccan museums to the modern era and to highlight the richness and diversity of the Moroccan culture. Morocco has a plural identity; it is Amazigh, Arab, Mediterranean, African, Muslim, and Jewish at the same time. The NFM focuses on the importance of museums in cultural diplomacy. It reinforces their role in serving the community and promoting a culture of tolerance, harmony, and openness to the arts and cultures of the world. This agenda reflects a new project of identity dynamics in a post-independent modern kingdom of which democracy and plurality are substantial constituent parts. Morocco has had a history of religious tolerance and cultural diversity, which has shaped its present unique identity. This has been reflected in many of the exhibitions that the NFM has mounted after its creation. The exhibitions strived to foster ideas about tolerant Islam in Morocco, intercultural and interfaith dialogues, culture and diplomacy, the diversity of Moroccan history and culture, democracy, and modernity. Most of the temporary exhibitions mounted so far shared general political themes. The art and ethnography temporary exhibitions that the NFM held at the Louvre and L’INSTITUT DU MONDE ARABE in Paris represented Morocco as “an open and tolerant society situated at the crossroads between Europe and Africa.” (Becker 2016, 88) Qotbi also stated in an article in L’ECONOMISTE on March 3, 2015 that these exhibitions were meant to promote the image of tolerant Islam in Morocco and to show the openness of the kingdom to other cultures and religions. In the same context, Qotbi claimed that one’s openness to cultures means the will to understand the differences between the peoples of the world. This is the only way through which Muslims can communicate with others about openness and tolerance, and this is why a number of countries have made cultural diplomacy a priority. The new labels of the national archaeology and ethnography museums in Tangier and Rabat, for instance, reflect Morocco’s strong political will to accept and tolerate differences. The museum of archaeology in the capital of Morocco, previously known as the Archaeology Museum of Rabat, has become the Museum of History and Civilizations, and the Kasbah Museum of Tangiers is now labelled The Kasbah Museum of Mediterranean Cultures. The new mission statement of both museums is narrating the cultural diversity of Morocco throughout history. The Kasbah Museum for Mediterranean Cultures represents the rich history of the city of Tangier in a permanent thematic exhibition. The collection represents the history of...
Tangier, from prehistoric times to the 19th century. It illustrates the life of the natives and that of the different settlers who lived in the North of Morocco: the Greeks, the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Arabs, and the Portuguese. Trade, myth, funerary practices, food, art, warfare, architecture, and other aspects of a community’s everyday life are set in thematic displays that highlight the intercultural and cosmopolitan nature of the region.

The Museum of History and Civilizations in Rabat displays a collection of paleontological and cultural artefacts, from the Paleolithic period to the 14th century (no photography allowed). This museum focuses on the process of archaeological research, the archaeological sites in Morocco, and the excavated findings in various regions in Morocco, like Volubilis, Taforalt, Sala Colonia, Banasa, Lixus, Tingi, Mogador, Tamusida, and Islamic Chellah. Through Archaeology and archaeological research, the riches of the different civilizations of Morocco are discovered, preserved, and displayed to create a platform for interpreting and narrating the hybrid identities of Morocco to local and international audiences. The Kasbah Museum of Mediterranean Cultures and The Museum of History and Civilizations are both examples of how the modern museum in Morocco researches, preserves, and narrates the plurality and diversity of Moroccan culture and identity to foster multiculturalism, democracy, understanding, and tolerance.

The first national art museum in Morocco has also been set to function as a public space that reinforces the community’s religious and intercultural dialogue. Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts (MMVI) explores the religious and cultural dimensions of a pluralistic society in a globalized multicultural world through discussions, displays, conferences, and study days that gain a considerable amount of interest in its agenda: “Medieval Morocco: an Empire from Africa to Spain” held at Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts (March 5 to September 31, 2015, Delery and Tuil-Leonetti), “Le chérifisme et le soufisme dans l'histoire du Maroc” (Sherifism and Sufism in the history of Morocco) on March 13, 2015, and “Le dialogue interreligieux: vivre ensemble pour une culture du dialogue” (Interreligious dialogue: living together for a culture of dialogue) September 17, 2015. Here, the museum is a significant platform that initiates dialogues originating from its nature, ontology, and history as a modern institution that relates to its locality, socio-cultural and political context, potential, and universality. MMVI aims to establish a unique local identity and a subjective unifying social and cultural power tolerant of difference and open to understanding other faiths, cultures, and civilizations. It also reinforces a moderate religious and cultural discourse that frames, interprets, and supervises its displays, regardless of their nature. The president of the National Foundation of Museums in Morocco, Mehdi Qotbi, stated in an article in LE MONDE AFRIQUE on March 8, 2015 that one of the main purposes of the exhibition Medieval Morocco that the NFM held at MMVI for Modern and Contemporary Arts is to narrate the history of a community where different faiths and cultures coexist. MMVI for Modern and Contemporary Arts also contributes to conceptualizing and researching the current preoccupations of museums in a globalized world where local communities urge the collective awareness and reinforcement of their socio-cultural products to ensure harmony and tolerance. In the same context, Crispin Paine claims that “We should see, too that a major incentive to museums to take religion very seriously, one largely led by museums learning staff, is the demand that museums join in helping to promote community harmony.” (2013)
In contrast, the cultural genocide of ISIS is a war against modernity, cultural diversity, plurality, freedom of belief, the right to existence, self-expression, freedom of speech, and by extension the world’s shared cultural heritage and relevant tangible knowledge resources. Within the political uprisings of the Islamic world and the unstable security situation that threatens communities and their cultures in the Middle East and North Africa, the Moroccan experience is worth considering since it stems from a diverse, postcolonial Muslim country that gives a different image on the future and potential of modern museums and institutions. Morocco builds on a history of intercultural influences and experiences to give meaning to the present and to establish harmony and tolerance through the institution of the museum. Moroccan national museums function as platforms for discussion and research. They reconstruct and highlight a plural identity, and they aim to democratize culture.

Notes


3. In 2015, Museum Mohammed VI for Modern and Contemporary Arts organized a series of talks and lectures on the topic of Islam and the culture of tolerance in the history of the Moroccan Kingdom. For example, the lectures “Le chérifisme et le soufisme dans l’histoire du Maroc” and “Le dialogue interreligieux: vivre ensemble pour une culture du dialogue” came to embody some of the basic goals of the National Foundation of Museums in Morocco (NFM). The NFM strives to put museums and culture at the heart of cultural diplomacy to foster the culture of interreligious dialogue and tolerance nationally and internationally.

References


