

SinnRäume – An Exhibition on Contemporary Religion in Germany

Exhibition Practice as a Medium in Religious Studies

ABSTRACT

In the research and exhibition project *SinnRäume*, students at the Philipps University Marburg examined the materialization of contemporary religion, exploring how religion is practiced at home, how a domestic room becomes a religious space, and how beliefs are materialized.

The rooms in which religious and spiritual individuals live are often filled with objects that are attributed special meaning. Be it in a Ganesh figurine, a decorative Buddha, a simple wooden cross, or even a painted mandala hanging on the wall, the research team discovered a great variety of design elements with personal religious meaning in the private spaces they were permitted to explore. These objects have in common that their meaning is defined by not only collective but also individual criteria and by how they are integrated into everyday life. Just as the meanings of these religious objects are individual, so too are the religious lifestyles of their respective owners.

The results of this project are shown in the exhibition *SinnRäume – Insights into Lived Religiosity in Germany*, which opened in November 2015 at the Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung) at the Philipps University of Marburg. The exhibition concept, the presentation design, and the strategies of communication applied are an attempt to present not only religious studies research data but also the research process by which this data was acquired, as well as to relate how religious studies approaches contemporary religious culture in all its plurality.

KEYWORDS

Museum, exhibit, material religion, religious aesthetics, mediation, museology, Collections, religious objects, spatial discourses

BIOGRAPHY

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RELIGIONS IN MUSEUMS AND EXHIBITIONS

Museums and exhibitions play a significant role in mediating issues of social relevance. Exhibitions that examine religion are a prime opportunity for presenting (and at the same time constructing) often little-known concepts and ideals to an interested public. Such museum projects involving religion have been discussed intensively since the beginning of the 21st century, culminating in the realization that presenting religions in museums requires particular forms of mediation.¹ That said, few institutions exhibit material objects on the basis of concepts taken overtly from the religious studies canon. Crispin Paine noted that a neutral representation of religious concepts is seldom an explicit part of the curatorial mandate. Although since the 1980s anthropological approaches have ensured that minorities are increasingly being heard and discussed, the diversity of contemporary religious culture is rarely shown.² He notes,

If my friend gives her Guan Yin statuette to a museum, it is likely to end up displayed (if at all) as an illustration of Chinese religion ... But it sits on her bedroom “altar”, alongside the Buddha figure and the crucifix, and plays and has played a crucial role in her spiritual journey through Catholicism, Zen Buddhism and Anglicanism into a personal mixture that works for her. Unless one day – improbably – a museum interviews her and collects these figures, this example of religion as it is actually lived (in the early third millennium by millions in the developed world) will be forgotten.³

A religious studies approach to the exhibiting of religious objects can be found in exhibitions curated by the Museum of Religions (Religionskundliche Sammlung) in Marburg, which opened in 1927. The first objects in the collection were donated by the founder of the museum, Protestant theologian and early religious scholar Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), who had obtained most of them during his travels in Asia in the 1920s.⁴ In his collection, Otto tried to establish a

1 Paine 2012, 4–9.

2 In describing this diversity of religious practice as syncretism, Paine underlines the ties and forms of reception that lived religion can draw from a variety of sources; see Paine 2013, 17–22.

3 Paine 2013, 22.

4 Runge 2017, 155–158.

concept which considered the specific nature of religious objects in their presentation. Thus, a teaching collection emerged, used for study and research, not a collection that was to be understood as art or a collection of representative cultural objects.⁵ In so doing, Otto concerned himself with the subtleties of exhibiting religious objects, the mediation of their contexts, and the diverse practices of religions. Developing from this core of primarily South Asian and East Asian objects, the Museum of Religions has grown substantially over the last 90 years. Today it holds approximately 9,000 objects from many regions and religions. The special exhibitions of recent years show not only historical objects but also contemporary cultural and everyday things and reflect contemporary museum and religious studies discourses, for example in exhibitions such as *Von Derwisch-Mütze bis Mekka-Cola: Vielfalt islamischer Glaubenspraxis* (2013) or *Es gibt keinen Gott! Kirche und Religion in sowjetischen Plakaten* (2015/16).⁶ The exhibition *SinnRäume* opened in November 2015 and was realized with the support of both the Museum of Religions and the Department of Religious Studies at Marburg. It was curated in the tradition of simultaneous reflection of both the representability and the communicability of contemporary religion. The exhibition *SinnRäume*, subtitled *Insights into Lived Religiosity in Germany*, shows the plurality and individuality of contemporary religious practice in Germany based on a number of case studies. A great variety of religious concepts and practices can be identified, both within as well as outside the large institutionalized religions that find little to no public resonance. Religious objects, symbols, and practices not only are a part of the public expression of religion, but also are manifested in the private sphere and living spaces. How, then, can a private living room become a sacred site? And what do prayer beads, for example, mean to their respective owners?

At the same time, the study of private living spaces and the narratives of their owners offer access and insight into the reality of everyday life. We argue that this lived religiosity is materialized in how individuals interact with their things and within spaces. The goal of the research and exhibition project was to study and present these forms of belief.

The exhibition faced the challenge of communicating academic discursivity – and of doing so in a manner comprehensible to lay visitors. The exhibition theme had to be presented without prejudice and also mediated to the visitor. *SinnRäume* was to be able to participate in academic discourse while portraying its message clearly. The exhibition topic requires impartiality be retained and conveyed. With the display based on the methods of religious studies, diverse religious styles are presented alongside each other in an equitable fashion. That

5 Bräunlein 2004, 55.

6 Franke/Runge 2013; Runge/Trofimov 2015.

focus on the diversity of beliefs raises the issue of how this approach might be conveyed in an exhibition which is understood as a medium of communication. How can one make these methodological and content-driven considerations clear and visible in an exhibition? The exhibition's status as a medium of knowledge transfer raised specific challenges that will be discussed in this article.

THE EXHIBITION *SinnRäume*

The exhibition *SinnRäume* was motivated by the wish to combine and apply museology and religious studies methods and theories. The research and exhibition team comprised ten students of cultural anthropology, art history, media studies, and religious studies. Inspired by various seminars that integrated the collections of the Museum of Religions into topics concerning religion in museums or material religion in general, the group of students worked voluntarily and independently to realize an exhibition that would implement theoretical knowledge and address the question of how contemporary religion could be displayed in an exhibition. From Spring 2014 until the opening of the exhibition on 29 October 2015, the team met first weekly and then, in the final phase of the project, daily. From the first discussions about theoretical approaches and issues of representation and mediation to the financing and construction of the exhibition itself, all curatorial questions were addressed in workgroups.

We aimed to develop our own research questions by applying an appropriate research approach. The goal was to create novel forms and solutions for the display of contemporary religion, providing unique interactive and participatory means of access to lived religion in a reflective religious studies exhibit. Attention was paid to ensuring the transfer of grounded scholarly knowledge, as well as to mediating different means of access to content.

In order to grasp the phenomenon of the materialization of individual religiosity, the project team conducted 20 narrative interviews across Germany with individuals in their homes. The *SinnRäume* exhibition presented eight of these personal portraits. These interviews demonstrate a broad spectrum of religious and spatial concepts, from liberal Jew Rahel with her cultural understanding of religion to Catholic priest Thomas in his house full of mementos and souvenirs. There is Jessica, a follower of Hare Krishna with a Krishna altar in her living room; Tabish and his family, who pray together and belong to the Ahmadiyya community; the nature-loving Protestant Heike in her garden; Esther, a Hindu-influenced Roman Catholic with her Buddha statue; ascetic evangelical chaplain Markus; and spiritual physical therapist Martina with her concept of immaterial space.⁷

7 These eight individuals (described using their own terms) are the current eight case studies in the *SinnRäume* exhibit.

Every room I live in is special for me and has my writing on it. My biography certainly plays a role here, in that I have received many valuable gifts and religious tokens, but also that this space serves my day-to-day life.⁸ (Thomas, January 2015, 00:12:30)

I am not a Buddhist, certainly not, but I love the Buddhas because they remind me of India. Just like some odors or colors are connections to India for me.⁹ (Esther, October 2014, 00:40:59)

When we pray here at home, we look to Mecca. I have an app on my mobile that reminds you of the prayer times and even the direction to pray in – looking roughly to the south-east.¹⁰ (Tabish, June 2014, 00:18:23)

When you move into your first own apartment, you really try to make it comfortable. I think, in the beginning, you really miss your old home. Your mother and your father or your own room. And I wanted to make it as comfortable as possible and for me that definitely included that I have these objects that I associate with Judaism here as well.¹¹ (Rahel, September 2014, 00:59:21)

These examples present individuals with varied living and religious models and were not chosen as representative of certain religions. The selection challenges visitors with the idea that in their own local neighborhoods there exist many different world views that despite their geographical proximity differ significantly from their own.

In the exhibition, these eight case studies are augmented by religious studies concepts divided into the working categories “religion”, “space”, “things”,¹² and “living”. These terms emerged in the course of the research as common core elements of the interviews. They were chosen as working categories on the basis of empirical analysis. They point to issues of everyday practice, socio-spatial construction, religious concepts and meanings, and narratives of objects and thus form the theoretical background to the exhibition. Contemporary dis-

8 “Jeder Raum, den ich bewohne und belebe, ist für mich Heimat und kriegt dann auch meine Handschrift. Da spielt sicherlich meine Lebensgeschichte eine Rolle, dass es viele wertvolle Geschenke und religiöse Zeichen gibt, aber auch das dieser Raum meinem Leben dient”, Thomas, January 2015, 00:12:30.

9 “Ich bin kein Buddhist. Ganz bestimmt nicht, aber die Buddhas liebe ich, weil sie mich an Indien erinnern. Genauso wie manche Gerüche oder Farben für mich Verbindungen zu Indien sind”, Esther, October 2014, 00:40:59.

10 “Wenn wir hier zu Hause beten, richten wir uns nach Mekka aus. Auf meinem Handy habe ich eine App, da kann man sich an die Gebetszeiten erinnern lassen und sogar an die Gebetsrichtung – so ungefähr nach Südosten”, Tabish, June 2014, 00:18:23.

11 “Wenn man das erste Mal umzieht und eine eigene Wohnung hat, dann ist man wirklich bemüht sich das gemütlich zu machen. Ich glaube, am Anfang vermisst man doch sehr das eigene zu Hause. Bei Mama und Papa oder das eigene Zimmer. Und ich wollte es mir schon so gemütlich wie möglich einrichten und da hat es bei mir definitiv dazu gehört, dass ich diese Objekte, die ich mit dem Judentum verbinde, auch hier habe”, Rahel, September 2014, 00:59:21.

12 We chose to use the term “thing” (Ding) instead of “object” (Objekt) in this context because it implies neither the existence of neither a subject nor a subject-object relationship. We understand “thing” as an overarching term that includes human and natural artefacts.

courses on the individualization and privatization of religion were also applied in our interdisciplinary methodology, as were spatial theoretical reflections on private space and corresponding religious concepts of life and living together. The results of our deliberations were contextualized in the terms and concepts of religious studies and made tangible in the form of texts, images, and quotations from the interviews (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Exhibitionview, *SinnRäume*, Photography by Wolfgang Magin © *SinnRäume*

EXHIBITING MEANING – CREATING MEANING

From the assumption that an exhibition is a medium of communication, it follows that in addition to the themes and content presented, the presentation itself plays a role in the generation of meaning. Thus, every form of presentation conveys a certain message. When the museum or exhibit is understood as a medium and the exhibition space as the central exponent, the chosen aesthetic for the exhibit becomes one of the most important communication media.¹³ Jana Scholze developed a theory of museum exhibits as a communication medium that is based on the definition of museums and exhibits as generators and constructors of knowledge, history, and opinion. Applying this cultural semantic approach, she incorporates the exhibition into a communication theory model

13 Scholze 2004, 258.

to reveal processes of forming meaning and communicating information.¹⁴ She examined the structures and processes of the generation and mediation of meaning in the medium of the museum exhibit.¹⁵ The medium of the exhibition becomes a speech act on the part of the curators to the visitors. The curators encode their statements, for example in the form of the objects they choose to exhibit, the correlations made between them, how they are arranged, the spatial configuration of the exhibition and the lines of sight, the implicit rhetoric, and the content of the explanatory texts.¹⁶ In a museum exhibit, visitors learn about the things being shown and their meaning from the curator's perspective. In addition to the overarching mediation and communication act that takes place through the content of the exhibition itself, various processes of coding and decoding take place within the exhibit. The generation of meaning is also affected – consciously or unconsciously – by the form of presentation.¹⁷ On the basis of these theoretical considerations, the practical design of an exhibition must address not only the content but also the form of communication. With the challenges that emerge with the communication of religious ideas and in light of consideration of theoretical assumptions and the reflection of created meaning, we are required to ask how new experience-based museology and mediation concepts can be combined with a specifically religious studies approach that claims neutrality. How, we wondered, might we design such an exhibition?

Applying media techniques and technologies, *SinnRäume* attempts to consider exhibition concepts as a medium for a communication act involving curator and visitor. In order to achieve this communication a balance between mediation, guidance, and vacancies (that is, space and impulses for the creation of meaning by the visitor) needs to be established.

The exhibition space as such will shape the visitors' awareness of the theme of the exhibit. The target audience of the Museum of Religions is both academic and non-academic. In consideration of the frequent visits of school groups to the museum, emphasis was placed in our exhibition design on experience-based mediation, identification, and emotional affects.

Religiosity and religious practices were to be made experienceable – but they had also to be contextualized and explained as objectively as possible.¹⁸ In the presentation of these religious concepts, a balanced composition was as important as it was difficult to implement. The route the visitor takes through the architecture of the exhibition, the installations, and the depicted private spaces

14 Scholze 2010, 121–149.

15 Scholze 2004; Paine 2012, 4–9.

16 Scholze 2004, 11.

17 Scholze 2004, 15.

18 Paine 2013, 6.

themselves make the content accessible to visitors through the application of contemporary museological concepts, that is, by applying visual, audible, and olfactory elements. In addition to reading direct quotations, visitors can also listen to interview excerpts, prayers, and hymns. Objects loaned by the interviewees and things used in religious practice can be touched, viewed, and even smelled. Finally, besides these interactive elements, visitors can become part of the exhibition itself by means of participatory submodules.

ARCHITECTURE

When visitors enter the exhibition space, they find themselves at the center of an installation. They are surrounded by door-sized panels that each introduce one of the eight case studies by means of photographs, texts, and quotations. The exhibition architecture suggests eight abstract spaces within the space of the exhibit. Ideally, the experience should be that of entering a room. The design elements have a curious voyeuristic aspect to them and arouse the visitor's interest in the spatial concepts that are introduced. In the middle of the exhibition space is a four-sided column where the four working categories – religion, space, things, and living – are explained. The category of religion is discussed on the front of the column. Behind the column there is a showcase with objects (on loan) from our interviewees and a panel titled “A Transparent Exhibition” (*Eine durchsichtige Ausstellung*), upon which we reflect on our principle question, about the ability to exhibit, both things in general and in our exhibition in particular. Here paper and pencils are provided and visitors are invited to comment (upon themselves) and contribute their ideas and personal stories to the exhibition.

To ensure that our eight case studies are presented and perceived as equal and

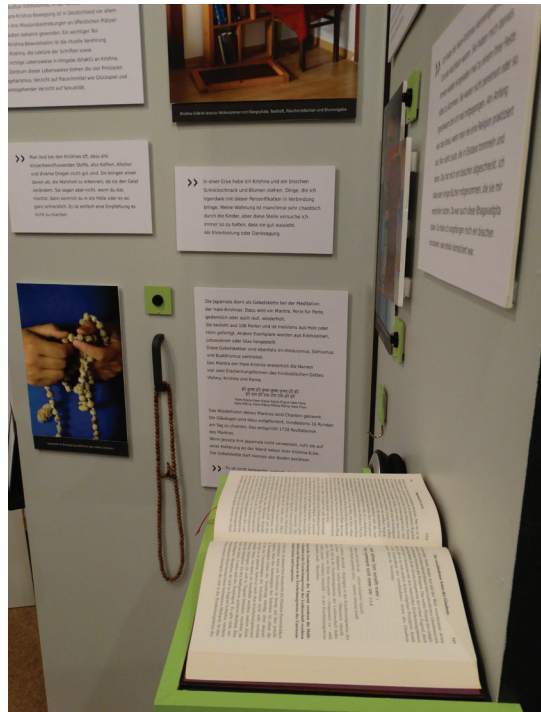


Fig. 2: Panel Jessica, Detail, Photography by Lilli Obholz © *SinnRäume*

independent portraits, they are each provided with their own space. They are arranged not on the basis of religion or relevance but rather according to the categories of religion, things, space, and living that they address. Contrasting examples are juxtaposed to avoid any unintended generalized hierarchies. Nevertheless, various spaces in the exhibition necessarily correspond visually.¹⁹ In exploring the exhibition, a visitor will draw correlations between the case studies and the centrally located working categories. This effect is used and managed by the directional system. The exhibition circuit and the visual guidance systems provide connections between the case studies. That said, visitors are free to move around the circular exhibition as they desire, and we do not promote any one predefined chronology or hierarchy. Various guidance concepts and design elements attempt to underline connections by means of constructed vacancies in which the visitor is asked questions about the connections and differences between exhibition elements.

When the exhibition space is entered, the focus is on the front of the central pillar, which in three design elements using three media addresses the different levels of how we want to understand religion. In an introductory text we present the discursive nature of religion as a working concept. Below this text, listening stations have been installed, where diametrically opposed definitions of religion from historical and contemporary theologians and religious experts, our interviewees, public figures, and even Wikipedia can be listened to. These statements are presented by various voices as a polyphonic and discursive miscellany.

The third media level is designed as a didactic support and as participatory. Removable cards upon which various quotes are printed hang below the text and the listening stations. During guided tours, visitors are handed these cards to discuss the quotes and then search for the right placement in the exhibition, which is marked by green hooks. Some of the cards cite our interviewees:

In a corner I have a Krishna and few knickknacks and flowers; things that I somehow associate with this personification. My apartment is sometimes very chaotic because of the children, but I try to keep this corner so that it always looks orderly; as a form of homage or thanksgiving.²⁰ (Jessica, June 2014, 00:26:59)

These quotes can be associated with their respective speakers on the basis of photographs and other texts. Jessica's statement above, for example, can be assigned to her via a photograph of her living room (Fig. 2).

19 Scholze 2004, 11.

20 "In einer Ecke habe ich Krishna und ein bisschen Schnickschnack und Blumen stehen. Dinge, die ich irgendwie mit dieser Personifikation in Verbindung bringe. Meine Wohnung ist manchmal sehr chaotisch durch die Kinder, aber diese Stelle versuche ich immer so zu halten, dass sie gut aussieht: Als Ehrerbietung oder Danksagung", Jessica, June 2014, 00:26:59.

Other cards cite the exhibition organizers at work and can be associated with the explanatory texts on methodology. The practice of interviewing and the role of the interviewer are part of the research process and are integrated into the exhibit. So, for example:

The tape recorder is already running. I would start then... um... Just begin by telling me something about yourself, something biographical, something about your religious biography if you like.²¹ (Interview with Markus, December 2014, 00:00:12)

The search for the fitting quotations undertaken by each new visitor or group of visitors is accompanied by new conversations that create new associations between the interviewees and the working categories. For example, during one guided tour of the exhibition, the differences and similarities between Markus' ascetic lifestyle, inspired by his evangelical church community, and the aniconism of the Ahmadiyya community, as Tabish explained it in his interview, was up for discussion. In the moderation of these discussions, emphasis is placed not on any superficial comparisons based on the material objects and how they are ordered but on using these insights as points of departure for discussing the corresponding religious ideals.

EXHIBITING SPACES AND MATERIAL RELIGION USING DIFFERENT MEDIA

Early on, a pivotal question concerned how space might be exhibited. In light of the focus on rooms, houses, and gardens as well as on practices performed in these spaces and places, the biggest challenge was to find a way to transfer these spaces into a small exhibition room less than 20 square meters in size.

The first ideas involving recreating parts of these spaces were quickly dropped in favor of using photographs of the rooms and objects instead. In combination with the explanatory texts, quotes, and interactive elements, we aimed to communicate an understanding of these spaces that reached beyond simple rooms.

The pragmatic decision to use photographs of rooms and objects instead of the objects themselves was also influenced by the exhibition team's reflections on the documentation of lived religion itself. The spaces being shown and the ensembles of objects in them were marked less by aesthetic criteria than by their status as a mnemonic device for the interviewees, and they were left in their original state. In practice, this meant that in photographing them, we neither removed objects nor dusted or rearranged them in any way. The per-

21 "Das Tonbandgerät läuft jetzt schon. Ich würd dann auch anfangen. Ähm. Erzähl doch einfach etwas über dich, etwas biografisches, gern auch schon etwas zu deiner religiösen Biografie", Interview with Markus, December 2014, 00:00:12.

spectives of the photographs were likewise chosen not with regard primarily to lighting conditions but based on the personal perspectives of the interviewees. The taking of the photographs coincided with and became part of the interviews. In the exhibit, these photographs are not illustrative, but, like the texts, independent media elements.

The photographs are considered visual media and imagery as well as material forms. They are printed on different surfaces and can be looked at, touched, or turned around. This way material religion is not only displayed in the exhibition but also used as an approach to mediate this content on different levels.

The living spaces depicted in the exhibition open the way for visitors to reflect on their own living situation or to identify with certain images. Thus, a Catholic priest among the exhibition visitors quickly identified with Thomas' toy monstrance. But he was also captivated by Esther's statements about her self-identification as a Catholic influenced by Hinduism, which significantly contradicted his own religious ideals. In addition to providing personal insights, the photographs also make a very personal tour of the exhibition possible, with more profound understanding of the ideals and everyday lives of our interviewees.

TEXTS

The text categories in *SinnRäume* range from statements taken from our interviews to contextualizing explanatory texts on religion to thematic texts on broader working definitions and the exhibition project itself. They provide information on different levels. First, the direct quotes provide an individual and emotional level of access. Our research process was rooted in an inductive approach, with terms of self-identification therefore a basis of definition. This approach was to be included in the presentation of the results, hence the use of the direct quotations. Meaning is thus mediated in the first person, with tangible protagonists describing their own perspectives. This lays the groundwork for visitors to identify with the persons portrayed.

During one of the first guided tours a woman declared her identification with more than one interviewee. While she shared some beliefs with Jessica and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, she also practiced some forms of meditation that Martina depicted. This personal engagement not only made the exhibition accessible to her but also sparked a discussion on similarities and differences between Jessica and Martina as well as an exchange between the visitors about their own experiences and beliefs.

The explanatory texts are intended to provide scholarly perspectives and research results as well as impulses and questions for the visitor's own encounter with the case studies. In addition, some wording enables a glance behind the

scenes of meaning-making in such an exhibit, specifically that on a panel titled “Insights into the Exhibit” (*Einblick in die Ausstellung*):

Museum exhibits create knowledge and convey that it is true and irrefutable. This is done by the curators: they select the things that you are allowed to see. Things that do not fit into the concept remain in storage. That is: objects are put together into groups that conform to the message of the exhibit, not with objects that conform to the context in which the object was used. This has more to do with the intentions of the curators than with the actual origin of the respective object. To the left you see a piece of art. Unfortunately, the postcards that stood next to it cannot be included in our exhibit. And it was part of our exhibition concept that when we showed you these specific objects, we would present you with this specific text. (Explanatory text on the panel “A Transparent Exhibition”, *SinnRäume*)

A goal of *SinnRäume* was to encourage visitors to reflect critically not only on the representability of religion in an exhibition but also on museum practice in general (Fig. 3).

The exhibition also shows how meanings and definitions are created and how they can change. This is reflected in the design of the object descriptions in the showcases. The loan objects came from the homes of our interviewees. The respective descriptions include standard data on size and origin, but this information is augmented by statements on the subjective meaning of the objects and in one case on the process by which a member of our project team collected contextual data on that specific object.



Fig. 3: Exhibition view on the Panels: Religion, A transparent Exhibit, Esther, Markus, Photography by Nikolas Magin © *SinnRäume*

In applying this mediation technique of focusing consciously on case studies, we relinquished any claim to be able to communicate any form of objective truth. The objects are shown in their complex individual significance. The exhibition form makes it clear that the case studies are not fixed examples of specific religions.

THE MUSEUM EXHIBITION AS A MEDIUM EXHIBITING (IN) RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Reflection on modes of presentation and mediation possibilities appears unavoidable in the face of the heterogeneous research object of contemporary religiosity. Jana Scholze has argued that theoretical exhibition analysis remains absent from the German-language scholarly canon. Building upon her arguments, the *SinnRäume* exhibition can be seen as a medium for the mediation of research results as well as a religious studies approach to religions.

We consider *SinnRäume* a performative exhibition that transpires with visitors and guides. Photographs, texts, and even sound stations can only implicate meanings, but guided tours in particular help create discussion of these private religious spaces. Such discussions and guided tours are inherent to the concept. They take place during the opening hours of the Museum of Religions, which is mostly accessible only on a guided tour.

Conversations about interreligious dialog and tolerance arose within the guided groups. Religious tolerance and freedom were nearly always commented on by the visitors without any input from the guides. Another recurring topic was astonishment at the diversity of religious affiliations in Germany beyond Christianity, a diversity that was somehow familiar to most visitors but had not been paid much attention previously. While such discussions were not explicitly intended in the conception of the exhibition, they are always encouraged.

Every group of visitors adds something to the exhibition, sometimes in the form of notes, sometimes in the form of stories. These add to the narratives of the exhibition and are included in subsequent guided tours, therefore constantly amplifying the exhibition. *SinnRäume* is fully realized by the visiting of the exhibition.

Our theoretical assumptions outlined above define a religious studies-based exhibition approach as ideally a value neutral and unbiased representation of religious styles. *SinnRäume* uses an actor-centered approach that defines religion in a broad sense through an emic view of the persons portrayed. This approach is also realized in the participatory character of the exhibit, which integrates the visitors themselves into the generation of meaning.

Participation in the creation of meaning in an exhibition is most fully present in the constructed vacancies.²² We assumed that within the reception process the participatory elements would aid the visitor in identifying similarities and differences across the religious models presented, and that the case studies would lead them to the realization that different religious spatial concepts and objects exist.

Inherent to the exhibition is an understanding of scholarship as discursively defined, based on working definitions. The exhibition therefore provides a methodological tool for a study of religion that approaches its object discursively. This experimental aspect is one of the most important features of our research. The reflective modules and participatory elements in this experimental approach were designed to open a window on the nature of empirical religious studies as well.

The exhibition deliberately uses presentation methods to generate meaning. Walking through the exhibition architecture and the depicted spaces, the visitor experiences the contents and message of the exhibition as visible and comprehensible. This presentation concept drew on the demands of the new museology of the 1980s and the concept of experience-centered mediation that had emerged in the 1970s.²³ This association-rich spatial architecture not only serves the presentation of objects but is also particularly appropriate if the goal is to present superordinate theories and abstract ideas on the basis of material objects.²⁴ The central challenge of the *SinnRäume* project was how best to present the abstract concepts of religion and space in a museological context.

This challenge of mediating an actor-oriented concept of religion that included individualized and institutional religion(s) was met by using case studies to exemplify various definitions of religion. The role of objects in these definitions was shown by direct quotations, while the spatial concepts were traced by photographs. In order to arouse the curiosity of the visitor and to create a certain experience, visual habits and presentation expectations were deliberately challenged and everyday behaviors (such as looking into drawers or opening flaps) were harnessed for didactical purposes. This experience of the constructed space of the exhibition architecture prefaces and guides the encounter with the core exhibition theme.²⁵ Vacancies were used deliberately to involve the visitor in the process of generating meaning. In the *SinnRäume* exhibit, spatial immersion into concepts of various spaces was made possible. At the same time, the construction was intended to convey that the issue was not that of staging religion but that of reflecting on religion. As a result, our empirical findings on the

22 Scholze 2004, 24, 136; Buschmann 2010, 151.

23 Scholze 2004, 263.

24 Scholze 2004, 28.

25 Scholze 2004, 258.

internal perspective on religion acquired further levels of contextualization and reflection in the exhibition process itself.

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTIONS

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- “Jessica” (anonymized), 2014, First Interview, Interviewed by Johanna Osse and Anna Matter (*SinnRäume*), June 2014 (51min.), Transcription in the archive of the authors.
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