

# The making of religious heritage

Burning churches, fiery emotions, multiple sacralities<sup>1</sup>

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The proliferation of religious heritage seems to flow self-evidently from the processes of de-churching and secularization taking place in many European societies. Although having become redundant or outdated, certain religious buildings, objects or practices may be revalued as religious heritage. This selective setting apart of religious places or practices considered 'redundant' as heritage – a value-adding process – involves a form of sacralization. Such processual perspective helps religious heritage to be seen as not just 'existing', but, like all heritage, as made. Importantly, the sacredness of religious heritage diverges from the sacredness of religion. With multiple sacralities attributed to it, religious heritage may speak to much larger and diverse audiences as global, national or cultural heritage.

THIS ARTICLE BUILDS UPON four premises: first, that religious heritage – like all heri-

1 I thank the organizers of the 'Religious Heritage and Change in the North' conference for their generous invitation. For many of the ideas and insights formulated here I am indebted to the collective work conducted in the context of the HERA HERILIGION project ('The Heritagization of Religion and the Sacralization of Heritage in Contemporary Europe', 2016–20). I use this opportunity to thank my colleagues for their constructive and pleasant collaboration. I also thank Birgit Meyer for her enduring willingness to discuss my work with her. I am indebted to Jeroen Beets for his assistance in editing.

tage – does not just 'exist', but is made.<sup>2</sup> A processual approach to religious heritage helps us to see that only certain objects, places and practices allocated to the domain of religion are selected and set apart as religious heritage while others are not. Such transfer from the domain of religion to religious heritage opens up many questions. How do these processes of selection take place? Who is in charge? What values are added, changed or lost when religious items become heritage?

The latter question pertains to my second premise: in the processes of selection towards a recognition as heritage, religious items are attributed an additional, secular value, which – following current scholarly interpretation in the field – may be understood as a specific form of sacralization (Meyer and De Witte 2013; Meyer 2023; Salemink *et al.* 2015).

The third premise is that such valuation is subject to historical and local developments and circumstances, and that

2 Here I connect with an approach in the field of heritage studies that takes the self-evident 'heritage nature' of cultural practices, places and objects regarded as heritage precisely as its object of research (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Macdonald 2013; Meyer and Van de Port 2018; and Smith 2006).

understanding the politics and practices involved in valuation processes requires research that is grounded in ethnography. An empirical focus on the dynamics of selection and valuation will shed light on how local, national or global actors identify with 'their (religious) heritage' and the processes of meaning-making involved.

My fourth premise is that such research helps to put materiality centre-stage. Following the material turn in anthropology and religious studies, religion is not to be reduced to the realm of ideas and meaning-making. Material media (bodies, paintings, temples, churches, statues, books, relics, crosses) are intrinsic tools in enabling people to experience the presence of, or to connect with, the divine. These are – in the words of the anthropologist and religious-studies scholar Birgit Meyer – material mediators, mediating between people and the supposed beyond (Meyer 2019). In de-churching or secularizing societies, religion-related material objects easily become issues of public concern (*ibid.*). What should be the fate – if I limit myself here to the material culture of Christianity – of churches, organs, crosses, statues and other religious objects in societies where large sections of the population do not regard themselves as 'believers' any more?

For this article, I will primarily focus on the lasting significance of churches, not necessarily redundant churches, in so-called secularized societies. I will do so by taking their materiality, their massive, tangible, visual, public presence, as the point of departure to investigate how these buildings remain invested with values and emotions and continue to appeal to the collective imagination. I am in particular interested in the generative power of emotions.<sup>3</sup> In

3 Here, I connect with the research theme proposed by 'Affective Societies', which

the case of church buildings, such generative power, I contend, becomes most clear when destruction is near, whether intended or accidental. My topic will be on the emotional force released by the accidental burning of churches and the way emotions instigate their remaking and preservation.

### Demolition versus preservation

In the evening of 8 November 2016, the tower of the Saint Laurentius church in Weesp, a modest Dutch town bordering the city of Amsterdam, caught fire.<sup>4</sup> Within half an hour the twenty-five-metre spire collapsed and fell – luckily not on the church nave, but on the small square behind the building. In interviews with various media, local inhabitants spoke 'with tears in their eyes' about the importance of the church for Weesp. For them, the tower with its characteristic green neon cross had been a landmark. In the words of Cees Pfeiffer, chairman of the local historical society:

Every time when driving home from vacation, while on the highway near Muiden (a small town close to Weesp) my father would say: I can see the green cross. We are almost home. The cross was a familiar landmark for all the people of Weesp. (Meershoek 2018)

The Saint Laurentius church is but one of the many Dutch Catholic churches that suffered from a shrinking parish,

foregrounds an understanding of sentiments as socio-cultural phenomena entangled in social collectives and moral communities (Slaby and Von Scheve 2019).

4 I am indebted to August den Hollander and Paul Aris for bringing the fate of the Saint Laurentius church to my attention. All translations from Dutch to English are mine.

and consequently from a lack of financial means for maintenance. Recent research on the Netherlands shows that the number of Catholic parishes has dropped by more than 50 per cent since 2003. Catholic church buildings further remain empty because only 150,000 of the 3.7 million Dutch that regard themselves as Catholics are actual church-goers (De Fijter and Den Boer 2021). Similar observations may be made for Protestant churches. The Dutch situation resonates with developments in other parts of Western and Northern Europe. In the Nordic countries, or the UK, France and Germany, discussions about the future of redundant churches raise issues about their heritage value. The fact that this is often experienced as a dilemma demonstrates that we are dealing here with objects that cannot be too easily disposed of.

Elsewhere, I have suggested thinking of items or materials that cannot be preserved, in whole or in part, but which at the same time resist being discarded, as 'sacred waste' (Stengs 2014, 2023). As an analytical tool, 'sacred waste' aims to flesh out the ambiguous qualities inherent in material that is difficult to dispose of, and to shed light on the processes of meaning-making that give form to individual or collective action. The waste quality in sacred waste does not denote a narrow understanding of waste as things or stuff that is dirty, rotten or polluting – but hints rather at superfluity. Redundant churches provide a particular instance of 'sacred waste' (Meyer 2019). There are too many redundant churches to keep all of them, or maintain them as religious heritage – yet, for almost every church, groups of people make an effort to rescue 'their church' from demolition.

How should we understand the forces that in many cases resist straightforward demolition when a church is not used any more and its preservation technically,

financially or for city-planning reasons is problematic? Apparently, redundant churches, as sacred waste, have an additional emotional or cultural value – a value we could designate as *sacrosanct*. From his research on repurposed church buildings in Amsterdam, the anthropologist Daan Beekers concluded that a widely shared sense exists that something sacred has remained. For this 'something' Beekers suggests the notion 'sacred residue', which he describes as 'that quality of a religious site, or of specific things within that site, that – in the perception or feeling of beholders – persists after the site has lost its original religious function' (Beekers 2016: 1). In other words: 'the earlier uses of the buildings continue to have an effect, albeit one that tends to be difficult to grasp' (p. 2).

Beekers's conclusion on the effect of churches on their beholders is highly relevant. His explanation refers to the churches' earlier usages, locating their sacred residue mainly in these buildings' religious past. The religious past is, however, I suggest, but one dimension of the sacred in the sacredness of redundant churches. The sacred quality in sacred waste, or in sacred residue, may denote other, more secular sacralities as well, as I hope to demonstrate. To further unpack 'this difficult to grasp effect', I suggest an additional focus that foregrounds churches' impressive, massive materiality to better understand the emotions such buildings continue to evoke.

### **Monumental presence: a local case**

Like so many other churches in the Netherlands, the Saint Laurentius church is not only a religious building but also a listed municipal monument, i.e. a building with, as the Dutch definition goes, an added value (for instance, aesthetic or cultural-historical) for the municipality and which therefore cannot be demolished, changed

or even renovated without formal consent. In 2015, the parish sold the church to a local entrepreneur. The municipality gave permission to transform the church into a multi-functional building containing apartments, a hotel room, a beer brewery and a yoga centre. The sale took place regardless of conflicting views on the original renovation plans of the new owner, which included demolishing a part of the church (WeesperNieuws 2015a, 2015b; De Erfgoedstem 2015; Gillissen 2015). The imminent partial demolition made the future of the Saint Laurentius church an object of heated emotional discussion, driving a wedge between the entrepreneur, local inhabitants, heritage organizations and municipal authorities. At stake were issues and claims about the moral ownership of the church, which go beyond religious or secular arguments on what is allowed or not. The contested views on the

use and future of the church are emblematic of so many other (redundant) churches in present-day Europe (Hemel *et al.* 2022a).

To improve his relationship with the inhabitants, the entrepreneur promised Weesp that the first thing he would do was restore the tower's green neon cross, which had not been working well for a long time. The green cross was mounted on the church in 1956. The church itself dated from 1876, but owing to a lack of finances, the 65-metre tower was only finished in 1900. The cross had been a gift from the parish community to the pastor. The initiative was formulated as 'to add more splendour to the church building'. Upon the cross's placement, the pastor spoke of 'an act of faith and a prayer towards those who wander or atone for their sins' (Historische Kring Weesp 2016). We can see here how the addition of the green neon cross, a value-adding initiative, was to serve as a



The Saint Laurentius Church with green cross in full glory. Christian Pfeiffer, *WeesperNieuws*.

visual outcry against the processes of de-churching, which had begun, irreversibly, in the 1950s. In the decades to follow, the value attributed to the cross changed along with the declining relevance of Catholic belief: it moved from being a merely religious symbol to a symbol of Weesp.

The entrepreneur's gesture to restore the cross met with wide general approval. Again, in the words of Pfeiffer:

Because of the overall bad condition of the church building, the green cross was regularly off. This was noticed in Weesp. The people said: our cross is off. That is the weird thing about churches. They are just there and people take this as self-evident. Until something goes wrong. Then it becomes clear how much such a church building means to the people. (Meershoek 2018)

Ironically, a short-circuit in the cross's new wiring caused the eventual fire. Now, the new owner pledged to restore the church to its original grandeur, and to have a new spire constructed, which would be an exact copy of the original one.

The Weesper people's emotional responses towards the destruction of their church – regardless of the fact that the church was empty and in a religious sense redundant – is worth further elaboration as it pertains to the propensity of almost every religious building to evoke emotions. Worldwide, much religious architecture is, to use the word of the anthropologist Edward Leach (1983), 'grandiose'. Be they churches, mosques or temples, most are built with the specific intention to induce awe. The adjective 'monumental', so often used in describing them, emphasizes their imposing presence, and refers to the bodily, sensory experiences people may have when

they see such a building or upon entering it. The fact that churches are able to evoke such experiences is important for understanding why, in times of 'de-churching', people go to such lengths to preserve 'their' church, irrespective of whether the building will live on, housing a supermarket, or as a multi-functional building without any space reserved for religious services.<sup>5</sup> It is, therefore, important to bring into focus the role of the religious buildings themselves, as objects with agency. They may be understood, in the Latourian sense, as actants: acting and acting upon people in ways that these are not aware of or, at least, in ways that are not entirely within human control. In that respect Cees Pfeiffer's observation on 'the self-evident presences of churches until something goes wrong' is insightful and will help to develop part of the argument here. Indisputably, although something has gone terribly wrong when a church building burns down, this does not sufficiently explain why such a destruction often induces enormous efforts to bring back what is gone.

### **The Stockholm Katarina church fire: a national disaster**

In their chapter of the volume *The Religious Heritage Complex: Legacy, Conservation and Christianity*, edited by Cyril Isnart and Nathalie Cerezales (2020), Eva Löfgren and Ola Wetterberg address the importance attributed to the reconstruction of the Evangelical Lutheran church of Catherine or Katarina church in Stockholm. Katarina church is a site of active religious practice as well as a historical monument.<sup>6</sup>

5 For a study on repurposed, multi-functional church buildings maintaining space for religious services in the Netherlands, see Kuyk 2017.

6 In Sweden the ownership of the building and interior of churches is organized along



On 16 May 1990, a fire severely damaged the church and its interior. As with the Saint Laurentius church, a short-circuit started the fire. The authors describe the emotional outcry that followed upon the disaster. The editor in chief of an established newspaper wrote the following day: 'Dear readers, the catastrophe that destroyed Katarina church has deeply shaken people all over Sweden.' The words of a well-known art historian, designating Katarina church 'an indispensable part of shared, often poorly maintained, Swedish cultural heritage', touched a nerve for many. In a parliamentary motion the rebuilding was claimed to be of 'great national interest', and the government was urged to step in to support the reconstruction financially. In brief, rebuilding the Katarina church became a matter of national significance.

Being a site of active religious practice, the parish immediately received large donations in support of the restoration. Soon a 'Save Katarina Foundation' was established, with members representing the church, Stockholm city authorities, heritage organizations and the national government. There was a general agreement that the church had to be rebuilt exactly, or even more beautifully and authentically than it had been. One even wanted to rebuild the oldest version of Katarina church, as after a fire in 1723 the church had undergone some eighteenth-century aesthetic adjustments. The 1990 fire provided the opportunity to bring back the original seventeenth-century Katarina church.

Relevant for my argument are the strong ideas and emotions about the importance of the church for Swedish national identity. As with the Saint Laurentius church, the

different lines from in the Netherlands, but going into that would lead too far from the central topic of concern here.



The Katarina Church after the fire.

destruction articulated and generated such emotions: emotions that many possibly had not been aware of before.

In their analysis, Löfgren and Wetterberg (2020: 16) address the 'entwining of religious and secular motifs in the reconstruction of Katarina church', a situation they capture as a 'practiced duality'. Different values, historical/cultural – thus secular – values versus religious values, converged, and enabled a shared ground for reconstruction. Such duality perspective, however, still departs from a divide between things, practices, or motivations regarded religious and things, practices, or motivations regarded secular, making religion and secular appear as opposed categories. To me, following up on insights formulated by Talal Asad (2003) and others, the categories of 'religious' and 'secular' are predicated upon each other; the religious is always constituted by the secular and vice versa. This implies that it is not that self-evident what exactly in a particular context or in a particular historical



The Notre Dame on fire at 20:06, 15 April 2019.

period is meant by religion and hence by ‘religious motivations’. Rather than an understanding of ‘the secular’ or ‘secularization’ as a ‘one-directional withdrawal of religion when we call something heritage’ we should direct our research to the associations and sentiments that come with the secular sacralization of religious buildings, objects and practices (Hemel *et al.* 2022b: 6). Asking what processes transform things considered religious into religious heritage, and which regimes of valuation and selection are mobilized, helps us to understand that religious heritage does not just exist, but is made, and how this making is part and parcel of local, national and sometimes even trans-national identity politics, pertaining to what is regarded as universal in moral and cultural values.

### The force of fiery images

The conflagration of both the Saint Laurentius church tower and the Katarina church demonstrate how their loss as ‘secu-

lar sacreds’ (Balkenhol *et al.* 2020) mobilized emotions of local and national cultural identity and belonging. The burning of Notre Dame, Paris, on 15–16 April 2019, shows that given the cathedral’s global iconicity such emotions are not confined within boundaries.<sup>7</sup> The fire destroyed the roof, damaged much of the cathedral’s wooden interior, and made the spire collapse. In his speech addressing the nation the next day, President Emmanuel Macron said: ‘Part of all of us burns.’ He promised to rebuild the cathedral – even more beautiful than it had been – within five years. As with the Katarina church, but of a different magnitude, donations began to pour in.

7 The destruction of Notre Dame has been topic of analytical reflection and ethnographic investigation in three other HERILIGION-related publications (De Jong 2023; Salemink 2022; Stengs 2020). For the development of my argument here, I especially rely on the work of Oscar Salemink.



One of the images of the Notre Dame on fire, shown during the André Rieu 2019 summer concerts. Screenshot footage Vrijthof summer concert, 11 July 2019.

In the days after the fire individuals, companies and institutions, from France and abroad, donated or pledged altogether 845 million euros – although, as it turned out, not all delivered their promises, French fashion tycoons in particular.

Testimonies of solidarity and sadness flooded in to Macron from national and religious leaders all over the world. Some were expressed in more religious terms, such as the tweet of Pope Francis: ‘Today we unite in prayer with the people of France’, or the message of the Senegalese president, Macky Sall, who expressed Senegal’s ‘solidarity with France and the whole Christian community throughout the world’. King Mohammed VI of Morocco lamented in his message ‘the loss of both a cultural and historic treasure, and a place of worship and prayer’. In other messages, the religious aspect was absent. The grand-imam of Al-Azhar tweeted, ‘I feel so sorry for the massive fire at the historical architectural masterpiece’ (quoted in Salemink 2022: 250). The Egyptian president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, spoke of a ‘great loss for all

mankind’. And, from the Netherlands, Prime Minister Mark Rutte tweeted: ‘Paris and France were hit hard by a scorching fire in Notre-Dame, one of the most iconic buildings on our continent. This destructive fire is felt throughout Europe. Just wished Emmanuel Macron a lot of strength with this enormous catastrophe’ (quoted in Salemink 2022: 251). The Indian newspaper *The Hindu* arguably captured it most eloquently: ‘Notre Dame cathedral is more than an exquisite structure for the French; the monument transcended its religious meaning and is a symbol of European civilization’ (The Hindu 2019).

The testimonies show that the Notre Dame fire was a polysemic phenomenon. Religious, aesthetic, architectural, cultural and historical values mingle sometimes even within one single message. There is no straight divide between religious leaders spotlighting religious values, or political leaders especially appreciating cultural heritage values or the other way round. Altogether their messages constitute an emotional outcry, both confirming the



importance of the cathedral for France's national identity and its transcendence of that boundary, by emphasizing Notre Dame's meaning for Europe, civilization and humanity.

The sentiment that the serious damage to Notre Dame was something of fundamental relevance, whether that something was felt as religious, national or European, or as affecting human civilization in general, resonated in many different ways, even in the domain of popular culture. Quoting UNESCO director-general Audrey Azoulay's words on Notre Dame 'as also a monument of literary heritage', Oscar Salemink brings in the strong association of Notre Dame with Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The image of the cathedral on fire instantly became 'a site becomes sight becomes icon' (Salemink 2022: 251), evoking the creation of memes and other references to the Disney film and musical. To empirically illustrate the potential range of resonance in popular culture, and the significance of the iconicity of Notre Dame within it, I will present an example from one of my own research projects in the field of ritual and popular culture. In July 2019, I encountered the burning of Notre Dame as part of an act performed by the Dutch violinist and orchestra leader, André Rieu. This encounter triggered my broader interest in the wider emotional impact of burning churches, as well as the use or mobilization of religious heritage in settings that are generally regarded as secular and entertaining, and as belonging to 'the domain of popular culture'. The next section provides an ethnographic digression on the use of the images of the burning Notre Dame in the André Rieu performance.<sup>8</sup>

8 This section uses ethnographic material from an earlier HERILIGION publication

## Emotional entertainment

First of all, we need to ask: who is André Rieu? His own website introduces Rieu as a 'musical phenomenon'. The website states:

André Rieu is quite simply a musical phenomenon like no other, a true King of Romance, having sold a massive 40 million CDs and DVDs and notched 30 Nr. 1 chart positions worldwide. Along with his 60-piece Johann Strauss Orchestra (the largest private orchestra in the world), André has created a global revival in waltz music, staging spectacular extravaganzas which are second to none. Having received over 480 Platinum Awards, three Classical Brit Awards for 'Album of the Year' and billions of YouTube views, André is one of the biggest solo male touring artists in the world. Each year his passionate live shows attract more than 600,000 fans and outsell mega artists such as Coldplay, AC/DC and Bruce Springsteen. (André Rieu: World Tour n.d.)

This endeavour is not just done out of prestige or money-making. Rieu claims to be driven by a moral imperative, and I quote him again from elsewhere on his website:

My dream is to make the whole of classical music accessible for everyone. To achieve that, I've had my own recording studio built, and we're working hard to make new recordings of the classical repertoire. (André Rieu: My biography n.d.)

(Stengs 2020), yet the argument is entirely developed for this publication.

Combining the roles of presenter, conductor and first violinist of the Johann Strauss Orchestra, Rieu follows the so-called *Stehgeiger* tradition, following in the footsteps of his illustrious predecessors, *Stehgeiger* Johann Strauss Sr (1804–44) and Johann Strauss Jr (1825–99). Consequently, Rieu's narrations about himself, the orchestra members and his music are crucial elements of each performance, and indispensable in steering his audiences towards the desired moods.

Important for the topic here is that Rieu's hometown is the city of Maastricht, in the Netherlands, where he was born and grew up. Throughout the year, Rieu and his orchestra travel the world, something that came to an acute standstill during the pandemic, of course, but which continued again in 2022. His tours include performances in Australia, Chile, Brazil, the United States, South Africa and many European countries. André Rieu is extremely popular in the United Kingdom in particular, Sky Channel even dedicating an entire week to him annually.

Every summer, Rieu returns 'home' and gives a series of concerts, usually about twelve in a row during weekends in July, at the central square of Maastricht (named the Vrijthof). That is the period when 'the world', that is – the world of André Rieu aficionados – comes to Maastricht, each concert having an audience of eight thousand people. For them, the idea of the maestro performing in his hometown carries the promise of an André Rieu concert experience that is more genuine and authentic than any performance elsewhere in the world can be: the local ambience of the medieval city centre, the romantic idea of having a chance to have a glimpse of Rieu's private castle, and most importantly, the real-life experience of the maestro performing at the iconic Vrijthof square.

Rieu always brings along his own stage: a Greek temple front in 'universal' concert hall style, with large screens at each side. The entire background of the temple stage is one giant screen, providing a décor that changes with the pieces performed. Meanwhile, the side screens will mainly show close-ups of André Rieu, the soloists and the orchestra, every now and then interlaced with a shot of people in the audience.

Much of the Vrijthof square's iconicity comes from the dominating presence of two large churches, namely the fourteenth-century Gothic Saint John's church and the Roman basilica of Saint Servatius. These churches appear in the André Rieu performances in multiple ways: as an architectural environment, as a narrative, as bell sounds and as digital visuals. On the one hand, each church has its own history, both as a religious building and as a heritage site (both are national monuments). On the other hand, they could be considered one single site, as the buildings are temporally and spatially intertwined. The churches are built only about ten metres apart and tend to form one iconic visual presence.

In his narrations, Rieu does not pay much attention to Saint John's church. The Saint Servatius basilica, however, the oldest existing church in the Netherlands and elevated to the status of basilica by Pope John Paul in 1985, does appear in anecdotes in which Rieu tells his audiences about his youth in Maastricht. This concerns his involvement as a young acolyte in the so-called *Heiligdomsvaart* (a procession with the basilica's relics) or as a member of the basilica's boys' choir. Such narrations allow Rieu to better articulate the church's presence as a distinct element in the overall stage-setting, and to designate it a specific role as part of Rieu's Catholic/Christian and local past.



The Vrijthof Square, just before the opening of the 20 July 2014 summer concert *Love in Venice*. Because of the theme, Rieu had extended his décor with the Doge's Palace and Rialto Bridge adjacent to the Saint Servatius Basilica.

Together, the churches have a captivating or even charismatic quality – possibly comparable to Beekers' 'difficult to grasp effect', that adds to the atmosphere of the summer concerts. However, my specific interest in the role of churches in the André Rieu concerts was only evoked in 2019, when Rieu included a tribute to the disaster-struck Notre Dame cathedral in his Maastricht summer concerts of that year. Rieu introduced his considerations with the following story:

Every time when I stay on stage here next to this beautiful Servatius church, I have to think of my youth. When I was five years old my parents sent me to the church choir of this church. I was there my whole youth, [continuing in a high-pitched voice]: I was the highest soprano [laughter]. So you can imagine that I have a very special

relationship with this church. When I was six years old something terrible happened. The Servatius church was on fire. The whole city was in shock. Firemen, police, all the people in the city went to the Vrijthof to look at the fire. Also my parents and me. And then, it happened: the burning tower fell on the roof of the Servatius. A terrible memory.

You can imagine that when the Notre Dame de Paris was on fire it all came back to me. In fact, the whole world was in shock. My orchestra and me and the Platin Tenors [three long-term tenor singers in the Johann Strauss Orchestra], we would like to bring a musical tribute to this magnificent church in Paris, this symbol of Paris, the Notre Dame. We are going to play for you I think one of the most beautiful arias from a French opera

composed by George Bizet, from his opera *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, and I can tell you, the way these three fantastic tenors sing this aria is really very very emotional. Give them an enormous applause – the Platin Tenors.<sup>9</sup> (*Shall We Dance?* 2019)

Thereupon, when the Johann Strauss Orchestra started to play the first notes, an image of Notre Dame, seen from the rear, filled the main screen, towering high above the orchestra. This image shows the cathedral in full glory before disaster struck, while the side-screens display closeups from the Platin Tenors and André Rieu. Then pictures of the burning Notre Dame appear. Dramatic images of its roof and tower, veiled in clouds of black smoke and high flames fade over into each other, while the aria reaches its dramatic high point. All ingredients work in tandem to establish an intense, affective experience never to be forgotten.

Rieu's 2019 summer concert DVD *Shall We Dance?* shows close-ups of people with tearful eyes alternating with close-ups of Rieu and the tenors and images of the burning cathedral. Working towards his climax, Rieu revived the worldwide shock of the moment, magnifying, so to say, the emotional impact of the appearance of the famous cathedral on fire.

### **Burning issues**

The André Rieu performance highlights two strands relevant for my argument. First, the intensity of the visual dimension of a church or cathedral being consumed by flames. It is a spectacle, albeit a violent one. Second, the intense focus on the unfold-

9 This quotation contains only the English text spoken by Rieu. Translating sentence by sentence, he also tells the story in Dutch.

ing destruction may evoke memories of, or connect with, earlier dramatic fires.

To understand the visceral experience that the visuals of the burning cathedral exerted on many, whether in Paris, France, Maastricht, Europe or anywhere else in the world, I cite Oscar Salemink's insightful interpretation on 'the sight of burning'.

Salemink captures the emotional responses to the fiery images of Notre Dame as 'a sight of ontological identification'. In his words (2022: 252): 'the sight of the burning felt not just as if Paris was losing its heart, but indeed as if [the observers] were losing part of their body – a limb or something very essential to their being. On stormy Twitter, many outsiders felt compelled to use words that are normally reserved for the loss of a person – perhaps not exactly offering condolences, but wishing strength with the loss and recovery. Here the valuation of Notre-Dame is not just as heritage or icon, but as a part of self.' This leads Salemink to finally conclude that: 'This status of Notre-Dame as a site of ontological identification beyond its religious aspect as the main site of Catholicism in France is based on a secular valuation of human life', and hence, 'ultimately predicated on a sacralization of humanity itself'. I suggest embedding Salemink's argument in a wider perspective that brings in the entanglement between materiality and emotions.

In an article titled 'On materiality', the anthropologist Gosewijn van Beek (1996) suggests focusing on what he calls 'the most superficial aspect of objects': their materiality and tangibility. Van Beek asks why it is that 'under many different circumstances certain symbolic scores can, it even seems: *must* be settled "materially"' (1996: 15, italics in the original). Present and past examples abound that illustrate this, apparently, strongly felt urgency: the



sixteenth-century iconoclasm in Europe, the Nazi book burnings, the recent Quran destructions in Northern and Western Europe, or the burning of American flags in various places of the world. Material settlements also concern the tearing down of statues, such as the giant statue of Saddam Hussein, or the anti-colonial, anti-racist ‘Rhodes must fall’ and Black Lives Matter statue protests. Since September 2022, upon the violent death of the Iranian Masha Amini, images of protests show women publicly cutting their hair and burning head scarves.

Van Beek raises a profound issue. The burning of flags or religious books does not erase the presence of these objects from the world. They could never all be located and destroyed. The production of flags will continue, new Bibles and Qurans will be printed. The physical public demolition of what is sacred to other people is on the one hand symbolic because it hurts people in an existential manner. At the same time, they are not merely ‘symbolic’ in the sense that an actual destruction takes place. Here Van Beek focuses on a quality shared by virtually all material objects: their destructibility, or in broader sense, their perishability. Objects’ destructibility is a potential tool in the hands of those who want to desecrate, ruin or contest the sacred possessions of others, whether that pertains to religious, cultural or national values. The destruction of the Twin Towers, the Bamiyan Buddha statues or the ancient city of Palmyra are arguably the most recent iconic examples. The systematic destruction of religious and cultural heritage taking place in Ukraine demonstrates the Russian attempt to materially erase Ukraine national identity – an act of violence designated as ‘culturecide’.

The specific situation of the involuntary destruction of churches by fire – secular sacreds of extraordinary societal value

– spotlights perishability in one of its most intense modalities. The image of a burning church building, the violent, dramatic, visual transformation of such a massive presence into rubble, remnants and blackened deformations, pertains to immersive, visceral experiences, which may trigger emotions and bring back memories of earlier fire-related destructions, as exemplified in the case of André Rieu. However, unlike what the solidarity testimonies of religious leaders and politicians seem to suggest, such emotional associations are not always those of empathy and sorrow. To give an example of the latter: Shlomo Aviner, a Rabbi who moved from France to Israel in the 1960s, suggested that the Notre Dame fire may have been a divine retribution for the burning of Jewish manuscripts in 1242. The first great Talmud burning happened in Paris at the Notre Dame cathedral square. This public ‘execution’ culminated in the burning of some 1,200 volumes of Talmud and other Jewish holy texts (Staff 2019; Koetse 2019).

### Restoring to authenticity

The material presented so far clearly shows how the emotions released by the burning of churches not only trigger, but even *demand* restoration or rebuilding. The fiery demolitions allow for an understanding of ‘making’ that brings in Bruno Latour’s proposition that the destruction of images cannot be separated from the creation of new images.<sup>10</sup> Destruction releases an emotional energy that, somewhat paradoxically, is productive at the same time. The meaning attributed to achieving such ‘resurrections’ may reach beyond the actual restoration itself and may be regarded, as argued

10 From Latour’s (2002: 16) perspective a church is an image ‘as it is acting as a mediation to access something else’.



The new spire being placed on the Saint Laurentius Church, 8 November 2016. Photos by NH.

by Ferdinand De Jong for Notre Dame, as offering a political opportunity to restore the sacred nation (2023: 2). As my case material will further demonstrate, such emotional projects of rebuilding and preservation enable new collectives and collective imaginations to materialize. What fascinates me is how much in the case of the three churches their envisioned restoration builds upon an ‘authentic remaking’.

In Weesp, almost exactly two years after the fire, the new spire exactly the size and style of the old one, including a new, similar, neon cross, was placed on the tower of the Saint Laurentius church. The hoisting of the 25-ton, 24-metre-tall spire was as spectacular as an emotional event. In the words of the mayor of Weesp: ‘It was an incredibly important, connecting moment ... The return of the spire was perceived as a return to something fundamentally Weesp’ (Weesper Nieuws 2018).<sup>11</sup>

11 The idiosyncratic use of ‘Weesp’ is hard to translate, evoking connotations in the sphere of ‘authentic Weesp (identity)’.

The successful completion of the endeavour gave a tremendous boost to the status of the new owner. In 2015 despised by many as a potential church destroyer, he was now awarded the honour of ‘Weesper citizen of 2018’ (Weesper Nieuws 2018). It was, as the local newspaper said: ‘not only an architectural tour de force, it also was a symbol of perseverance after great adversity’ (*ibid.*).

In Sweden, there was an overall agreement that the restoration of Katarina should be an effort – as formulated by Löfgren and Wettenberg – to ‘retrieve the *oldest* version of the building’ – its seventeenth-century version (2020: 23). In addition to bringing back the original design the church had to be rebuilt with traditional crafts and materials. We should think here of such techniques as the use of birch bark as waterproofing and manually forged nails (and no screws). The aim was to reconstruct the Katarina church as authentically as possible.

Also the rebuilding of Notre Dame demonstrates the importance of what



The Katarina Church after the restoration in its present state (photograph taken 20 January, 2013).

Mattijs Van de Port and Birgit Meyer call ‘a politics of authentication’ (2018). I return to Macron’s promise to rebuild the cathedral even more beautiful than it had been. Even more beautiful ... what would such a thing entail? At the time, Macron thought about giving the cathedral a ‘contemporary touch’. An international contest invited architects to submit their plans. The suggested proposals included the transformation of the roof into a pool, a public park, a glasshouse, covering a green, eco-friendly, urban farm or public park (Daniels 2019). Inspired by three beehives having survived the fire, one design suggested transforming the spire into a giant apiary. Yet many powerful stakeholders, such as the French senate and the mayor of Paris, insisted on restoration to the old design. The French Architects’ Guild warned that it ‘would be a grave mistake to rebuild the roof in anything other than the same wood used in its original construction’; wood was not only the most ecological and structurally

sound material but also naturally fire resistant (White 2020). In May 2020, Macron dropped the idea of a contemporary design and instead decided for an identical restoration of the roof and spire. The element of the huge restoration project that to me most emblematically pertains to the symbolic rebuilding of the nation is the search for the proper wood.<sup>12</sup>

Like the original roof construction, the new beams were to be made of oak. Altogether, a thousand large oaks – perfect in shape and length – were needed; these were donated from over two hundred forests across the country, the selection guaranteeing that the four corners of France would be represented within the rebuilt cathedral. In the words of the president of the national forestry network (Michel Druihle): ‘Given the place occupied by the cathedral in the hearts of the French, in the history of France and the world ... we are happy [that] the entire industry—from foresters to sawyers—is mobilized to meet this challenge’ (McGreevy 2021). Some most special trees had been planted in a royal forest during the reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King, and had still been, as some observers noted, ‘just a sapling during the French revolution’. Their age of well over three hundred years contributes to the historical authenticity of the rebuilding project. As formulated in *The Guardian*, the trees were given ‘a sacred destiny’ (*The Guardian* 2021).

Also internationally, the initial emotional shockwave materialized in craft contributions to the cathedral’s restoration to its original glory. For example, the choice for an identical reconstruction and

12 See also De Jong’s interpretation of the ‘resurrection of the Notre Dame’ as a ‘condition for the continuity of the French nation’ (2023: 2).

identical materials inspired a revival of ‘800-year-old woodworking techniques’ in Washington, DC. A team of master carpenters built and donated a three-ton oak truss as part of the roof reconstruction. The truss, an exact copy of an original and made by only using medieval woodworking techniques, was hoisted onto the cathedral in September 2019.<sup>13</sup>

### To conclude

The three churches in this investigation, the Saint Laurentius, the Katarina church and the Notre Dame, exemplify how churches, as distinctive monumental material presences, built with the objective of evoking awe, and charged with a moral (religious or other) value, have the potential to enforce their restoration and preservation. This potential comes in particular to the fore in the wake of conflagration. The ‘sight of burning’ – the image of the violent process of destruction unfolding – may move people in both senses of the word. Whether the emotions relate to religious, aesthetic or historical sentiments, ‘their church,’ a multiple sacrality, must be restored in its authentic glory. Fires, like other events of high intensity, are pre-eminently fit to shed light on the dynamics of affect and emotions that are always present, but under normal circumstances hard to notice. In this case, church fires enable a perspective on how heritage is made in present-day interactions between emotions surrounding religion, morality and identity. ■

13 Another example of such international artisan support are the Cologne stained glass artisans working on part of the restoration of the cathedral windows, as a special donation of North Rhine Westphalia (Hickley 2020).

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