

Art and/as Religious Syncretic Border Crossing: Beyond the World Religions Paradigm and the Religion/Culture Divide in Museums and Interreligious Studies



Journal of Interreligious Studies
March 2024, Issue 41, 113-127
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

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Abstract

Art in museums often portrays the so-called world religions paradigm, so Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, or Islamic (and so on) art and artefacts are regularly found in their own distinct section. However, art—like the religious worlds depicted—does not exist in monolithic silos. While art studies, and museum displays, often mention cultural context and how the art of a particular “religion” changes in relation to this, what is often neglected is the religio-socio-philosophical worldview that is entailed in such supposedly culturally adapted art. Buddhist art in Gandhara, for instance, does not simply show a Greek influence in how the Buddha is portrayed, but also how he is thought, for early Buddhist aniconism has given way to a new Buddhist iconographic display. This paper argues that the distinction often built of religion and culture hides the deeper syncretic exchanges that occur when an image of Jesus or a statue of Buddha appears elsewhere. Indeed, we can even speak of art expressing an interreligious global dialogue of worldviews and cultures. Highlighting the interreligious connections in embodied artefacts, with a particular but not exclusive focus on the collection of Singapore’s Asian Civilizations Museum, this paper will note some of these syncretic flows and hybrid creations as a step towards decolonising the way we imagine both “religion” and “culture”. To this end, it engages debates in the critical methods and theory debates around the term religion, how interreligious studies may help decolonize the wider study of religion, and the display of religious artefacts in museums in Singapore and globally.

Keywords

Decolonization, religion, culture, syncretism, hybridity, Buddhism, Christianity, Singapore, Hinduism, Islam, Southeast Asia, borders, crossings, land

Art, Religion, and the Interreligious

Neither “religion” nor “art” have clear or obvious meanings, both being what have been termed “essentially contested concepts.”¹ What gets classified into either box, as well as how meaningful those classifiers are, is itself a matter of considerable debate—let alone what “religious art” may consist of. While debating and problematizing these terms is not the aim of this paper, I will speak into these debates. My central concern will be to look at how our classificatory language of religion conceals certain things when it comes to looking at forms of religious imagery. With this concealment comes an occlusion of the lived experience that lies behind religious imagery. Without taking these terms for granted, I will nevertheless deploy them here as staking out what is commonly delineated territory within our broad socio-cultural sphere, yet at the same time my paper will push back against them. This will occur in several ways.

Firstly, I will have a concern for the interreligious aspects of religious art. Given that religion is itself a precarious term, speaking of the interreligious is clearly not simple. As I and other authors have argued, the broad sweep for what passes as “the religions” within the world religions paradigm (WRP) has imagined every tradition as its own self-contained world of meaning and reference. To speak of the interreligious is to problematize our ordinary WRP by showing the syncretic and non-essentialist nature of everything labelled as “a religion”. Secondly, by looking at religious iconography in museums, questions are raised about how it operates there as “art”—that is to say, as an object of cultural and/or aesthetic value, divorced from the devotional context in which it arises.² This is not to say that an Orthodox Christian icon or a Hindu *mūrti* is not art, but it is more than that if we understood this signifier operating under what Taylor would term the imminent secular gaze. Thirdly, against any claim that such objects must be understood within their religious context, as images of devotional meaning, I will take up the interreligious nature of these items, as such, to some degree placing them within a different context other than that which those who may claim them for a singular tradition may see them. Finally, and crucially for this paper, will be to contest the language of “culture” and “religion” as discrete and isolated regions. Therefore, this essay will challenge the idea that we may speak of religious works of art as specific cultural expressions of, for instance, statues of the Buddha or crucifixes of Jesus, as if only some “cultural” frame changed without altering the “religious” meaning of the objects themselves. This will be placed within the matrix of interreligious studies as a field, and its interest in the dynamic interaction between traditions.³ In this, it will be argued that a decolonial lens will help us delve deeper.

The paper is divided into three sections. Firstly, I will start with some conceptual framing of issues, focusing on how art may appear in museums, but addressing the problematic nature of religion, how we understand syncretism, and the need for an interreligious framing. It will be accompanied by a selection of mainly Buddhist images showing changes across time and place.

¹ Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies*, Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021, 29–30.

² A growing literature exists around this question, see, for instance, Bruce Sullivan, *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013; and, Gretchen Buggeln, Crispin Paine, S. Brent Plate, eds, *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

³ See Paul Hedges, “Interreligious Studies,” in Anne Runehov and Lluís Oviedo, eds, *Encyclopedia of Sciences and Religions*, New York, NY: Springer: 1176–80.

Secondly, I will address the twin terms “religion” and “culture” within a decolonizing frame that also makes note of how taking materiality into account affects how we understand the significance of the material and embodied. Thirdly, I will focus on several images representing both Buddhist and Christian iconography and reflect on the interreligious crossings that they signify. A brief reflection concludes. Notably, this paper is primarily a theoretical exploration within interreligious studies and the study of religion more broadly. While I will engage with debates and literature in both museum studies and art history, I am seeking neither to make any intervention within those fields nor to be following those standards or conventions. As such, despite my reflection on certain works of what may be deemed art, I am seeking neither to show how art historical investigations may be deepened by what I have to say nor to engage in the debates of that field. Rather, my lens is around theorizing and decolonizing the concepts “religion” and “culture” within an interreligious studies frame. As such, I will not seek to analyze and explore any specific image in depth in terms of its context, ideology, and worldview; rather, the images will simply be visual pointers for my argument.



Image 1: Cross with the figure of Amitabha, Japan, c. 1945-5; Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum (Singapore), Author's photograph

Framing What We See: Religion, Art, Museum

Erving Goffman's frame theory seems apt to consider how we see works of art, or rather the conceptual world in which we place that art.⁴ The frame, for Goffman, is what we do not see, what helps (or, it may equally be said, hinders) us in seeing, and provides shape and meaning for our experience. Sometimes, though, a particular piece of art may jar against our frames, we do not know where to place it. The cross with the figure of Amitabha in the middle (Image 1) is arguably just such a case.

It is an image, a work of art, that struck me the first time I visited the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore.⁵ It is a type of image made around the late 1940s and early 1950s in Nagoya, Japan. During this period, just after WWII, there was a growing fascination with the so-called hidden Christians, those who had remained Catholic after Christianity was banned in 1639 until it was once again legalized

⁴ Eric Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (London: Penguin, 1975). I also draw, here, from the developments in Eric Gombich, *The Sense of Order* (London: Phaidon Press, 1979).

⁵ This paper is developed from a talk I first delivered for a series for the Asian Civilizations Museum, Singapore: Paul Hedges, “Interreligious Encounters in the Museum: Religious Borders and Crossings in Art and Artefacts,” 15 April, 2021, available at: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=3882094451838661 (accessed February 27, 2024).

in 1873. For a while, it was believed that these images were used by those hidden Christians as a way to keep their faith alive disguised within a Buddhist representation.⁶ However, they were simply the imagined creation of a much later period. As such, this image is not an interreligious encounter, if by that we mean the crossing and enfolding of beliefs and practices across borders of belonging and identity. Rather, it is an imagined representation of what that might look like. Nevertheless, the Buddha on a cross, the Amitabha Buddha of the Pure Land sitting on a Christian symbol, remains a striking representation that, perhaps, makes us think what might be possible when we enfold two symbologies together. Yet it may also offend our sensibilities, and certainly violates our usual conceptions of religion. It also raises questions about how and where religion is displayed in museums through particular artefacts, each typically located according to a presumed and discrete religious affiliation. In this case, however, they appear to have the signifiers of two religions.⁷

The World Religion Paradigm (WRP), shaped through the imaginary of Western scholars within a modern Christian frame, depicts religions as distinct worlds of meaning. Each “religion” has its own beliefs, rituals, symbols, cosmology, and so on, and stands in a seemingly rigid box demarcated from every other religion, each of which is equally fitted within its neat box.⁸ Of course, scholars acknowledge the language of growth or emergence, so we are often told that Buddhism grew out of Hinduism, or that Christianity emerged out of Judaism. This language though is itself an act of epistemological violence towards the entangled birth narratives, convoluted patterns of growth, and negates the symbiotic crossovers that emerged long after one had supposedly emerged from another—despite the older one perhaps not even existing when the younger was supposedly birthed from it.⁹ But this language of separation is dominant, and we see it within how we publicly think about religion. This is not simply in such places as distinct places of worship, or separate memberships of interreligious organizations, but also within the

⁶ See Pedro Moura Carvalho, Clement Onn, István Perczel, Ken Parry, Lauren Arnold, Maria da Conceição Borges de Sousa, William R. Sargent, *Christianity in Asia: Sacred Art and Visual Splendour*, Singapore: Asian Civilisations Museum.

⁷ On some notes on this in relation to Singapore’s Asian Civilisations Museum, see Sujatha Arundathi Meegama, “Curating the Christian Arts of Asia: Global Art Histories at the Asian Civilisations Museum,” *Archives of Asian Art* 70.2 (2020): 151–71.

⁸ See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 45, see also 23–24. A much wider literature surrounds the debate about the terminology “religion” and the WRP, for selected literature relevant to interreligious studies, see: Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005; Christopher R Cotter, David G. Robertson, eds, *After World Religions: Reconstructing Religious Studies*, New York, NY: Routledge, 2016; Paul Hedges, “Multiple Religious Belonging after Modernity: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model,” *Open Theology* 3.1 (2017): 48–72; and, John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity*, New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020.

⁹ On the Buddhist-Hindu side, we must be aware that what we typically term “Hinduism” is, scholarly speaking, a development of arguably only the last just over one thousand years, and concepts such as ahimsa seemed to first develop in Jain and Buddhist circles, only later being taken up by the Vedic tradition amongst the various adaptations that came to represent Hinduism as we know it. See Cathy Cantwell, *Buddhism: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 22–24; and Paul Williams with Anthony Tribe and Alexander Wynne, *Buddhist Thought: A Complete Introduction to the Indian Tradition*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1–15. On the Jewish-Christian side, what we today know as Judaism, or Rabbinic Judaism, grew up alongside the developments of the Jesus movement, both as outgrowths of the earlier tradition, often termed Second Temple Judaism, and both as essentially Jewish movements, and there were centuries of intertwined connections. See Mark Nanos, “Paul and Judaism,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 551–54, and see Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Greco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

museum. Religious artworks, when we see them, each represent a particular religious tradition.¹⁰ A statue of the Buddha, we think, is obviously Buddhist, a statue of Vishnu obviously Hindu, a statue of Jesus obviously Christian, and so on and so forth, and likewise aniconic images are distinct for each tradition. Indeed, within the museum, our interest and representation of differences between these traditions is often seen to be culturally based. Yet this common assumption is not correct, for while we may imagine that “each religion is a clearly bounded and discrete territory, marked out as a separate entity—Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Judaism, Wicca, Shinto, and so on,” critical analysis informs us that this “is almost entirely historically and conceptually wrong. No religion is a cultural and conceptual island.”¹¹

Let us explore a few images from the Buddhist tradition to show this, and this will help draw us towards the focus developed here on “religion” and “culture”. The first (Image 2) takes us back around 1500 years to China and the Eastern Wei Dynasty: a Stele with the figures of



Image 2: Stele with the figures of the Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, and Maitreya China, c. 534-550 CE. Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum (Singapore), Author's photograph.

¹⁰ In some contexts, these associations may certainly not be so obvious. For instance, in Thailand Buddhist temples may have statues of Brahma as a guardian deity, and scholars of South Asian Buddhism have spent much time contemplating how such “Brahmanic” religion fits into the matrix there, without often considering that Brahma, or others, may be Buddhist deities in this context. (Buddhism does not traditionally deny that deities exist, it merely sees them as beings in samsara, though at an exalted status.) For some references and a survey of this, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 84–7.

¹¹ Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 72. It is worth noting that this is not to say that we cannot, in some senses, also speak of such things as Buddhist, Christian, or Islamic art. While there are certainly problems with how we have come to delimit the range of traditions we define as “religions” within what Tomoko Masuzawa has seen as a “striated” set of traditions that has developed over several centuries, there are nevertheless distinct lineages. While it is true that, for example, “Buddhism” is a modern Western coinage that pre-modern Buddhists never used (they never spoke English so such an observation is mundane, yet has been made), pre-modern Buddhists knew that Indic Buddha-dharma, Chinese *fojiao* (Buddhist teaching/tradition), or Thai *pūt-tá-sàat-sà-nāa*, (Buddha’s *sasana*, or tradition within a specific socio-cultural framing) related to the same tradition. Naïve assumptions or claims that such things as Buddhism or Hinduism are entirely Western scholarly imaginary creations are their own orientalist discursive tropes. My claim is not, therefore, to replace an assumption that certain “religions” exist with a claim that no “religions” exist. There are important reasons, both scholarly and political, why we may wish to name distinct traditions as sources of particular artworks, not least to include them within a discursive frame that may wish to diminish the contribution of certain traditions, that is, as to whether “art” (as a valorized category) is produced only by certain groups and not others. I thank both my anonymous reviewers for suggestions on noting this and suggesting some references. On Masuzawa’s arguments here, see Tomoko Masuzawa, “Striating Difference: From ‘Ceremonies and Customs’ to World Religions,” *Arcade: Republics of Letters* 3.3 (2014): 1–25. On the politics and decisions around naming Islamic art, see Bilal Qureshi, “Opulent And Apolitical: The Art Of The Met's Islamic Galleries,” *NPR* (3 August 2015), available at: <https://www.npr.org/2015/08/03/429010005/opulent-and-apolitical-the-art-of-the-mets-islamic-galleries> (accessed February 27, 2024). On the Orientalist discourse around speaking of religion, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapters 1 and 7.



Image 3: Bodhisattva Gandhara, c. 3rd-4th century CE, Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum (Singapore). Gift of the Kwan Im Thong Hood Cho Temple, Author's Photograph.

the Buddha, Avalokiteshvara, and Maitreya. Despite a huge time gap, we see a lot of similarity with Image 1. All are clearly East Asian Buddhist figures. Serene and calm, with stylized draping robes, and the hands in what are termed mudras, symbolic postures, each with particular meanings. We might not find this striking because these images may fit some of our stereotypical expectations of Buddhist art, but what lies packed behind this? To help unpack this, we can go to an earlier representation of the Buddha. In Image 3, we see a head and torso. This dates back a bit earlier to around the third or fourth century CE, and is from Gandhara in Central Asia, around modern-day Pakistan. The stylistics are utterly different from the East Asian images we have seen, and this is historically, artistically, and culturally not surprising. It is almost a banal statement, for every period and region portrays such images according to their own norms. But we need to think what a massive set of changes are represented by these two images, especially in relation to what has gone before. It is generally well-known that the early Buddhist tradition was aniconic: images of the Buddha were not made because

it was felt that, since nirvana went so utterly beyond all human experience, it was impossible to represent what the Buddha was in iconic terms.¹² How do you show a Buddha as a Buddha? As such, the earliest representation, and ones which retained currency in at least some Buddhist lands for many centuries, included the use of footprints, often deeply stylized, to represent the Tathagatha (the one thus gone); or else an eight-spoked wheel was employed to show the eightfold path; or again simply an empty space was left, a throne or chair with no one there, often clearly empty in the midst of figures listening to the Buddha's teaching, the seat under the

¹² The distinction of iconic and aniconic art is indebted to the work of the German archaeologist Johannes Adolph Overbeck (1826–1895), who coined the expressions *anikonisch* and *Anikonismus*, see Milette Gaifman, “Aniconism: definitions, examples and comparative perspectives,” *Religion* 47.3 (2017): 335–52. However, they were popularised, especially as concepts in relation to Buddhist art, by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, most especially in his article “The Origin of the Buddha Image.” *The Art Bulletin* 9.4 (1927): 287–328. The distinction remains current in more recent discussions, e.g. Vidya Dehejia, “Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems,” *Ars Orientalis* 21 (1991): 45–66; Susan L. Huntington, “Early Buddhist Art and the Theory of Aniconism,” *Art Journal* 49.4 (1990): 401–408. The discussion on Gandhara often notes that a Greek stylistic influence first gave rise to iconic representations of Buddha, however, this is often couched in arguments such as that to be competitive in a landscape where other religions had statues, Buddhists needed to do this too. As such, it is often framed as a cultural-stylistic influence, but I argue it points to something far more substantive in how Buddhology is conceptualized. For some aniconic images, see: <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/ap-art-history/introduction-cultures-religions-apah/buddhism-apah/a/images-of-enlightenment> (accessed March 7, 2024).

Bodhi tree where he had attained enlightenment left empty.¹³ Absence, more than presence, marked these early Buddhist images.

Representations like those in Image 3, the earliest anthropomorphic images that we know of the Buddha, appear in a place to the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, or Central Asia, known as Gandhara.¹⁴ It was an important early Buddhist center, but it is also where the Macedonian emperor Alexander the Great reached in his attempt at world domination. He intended to set up new cities in his conquests, and so artisans and craftsmen followed his armies. So here, in Central Asia, a fusion of Greek and Buddhist cultures and worldviews met. For the Greeks, it was only natural that deities should be portrayed in human form, and adapting this we see the earliest Buddha and bodhisattva statues looking like Greco-Roman gods, like an Apollo.

Elsewhere in Asia, as Buddhism spread, this human representation against the early aniconic, or anti-representational, attitude persisted. Hence, we see in various locales many Buddhist images that will be familiar, such as the “Walking Buddha” statue (see image 4). The argument of this paper is that images such as this show far more than just different cultural expressions of how Buddhist art has adapted to its surroundings, which is how museums display them, or how the WRP may ask us to think of them. Rather, we are actually seeing dynamic and syncretic border crossings taking place. These changes are not simply a superficial enculturation, but mark a profound religio-philosophical reconceptualization that our normal categories fail to let us see. The frame of Buddhist art does not ask us to see what is there before us. I will, below, take this matter up directly in relation to the way that we typically distinguish “culture” and “religion”, with the stylistics of statues seemingly representing something “merely” cultural, yet somehow the “essence” of the religion remains unchanged within what is shown. Here, I will just note an issue taken up further below, which is the way that materiality and embodiment has been predominantly dismissed or side-lined in academic thought, and the centuries of tradition behind it, such that a supposed conceptual-linguistic world is taken as the realm of significance, even “truth”, and what is “merely” shown physically is secondary to this. As such, unless we directly see an argument in written form that an image represents



Image 4: Walking Buddha, Thailand c.15th-16th century CE, Collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Author's Photograph.

¹³ Sensabaugh David Ake, “Footprints of the Buddha,” *Yale University Art Gallery Bulletin* (2017): 84–89.

¹⁴ The classic study is John Marshall: *The Buddhist art of Gandhāra: the story of the early school, its birth, growth and decline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960).

something more, we assume that physical representation cannot enact any real change. The material turn suggests we must take the material and physical more seriously.¹⁵

As is well-known, the demarcations of religion we know are based within a Western, (Protestant) Christian, and modern frame. While this paper is not the place to enter into details, either through an Islamic or a Chinese frame, as just two examples, we would see the (“religious”) world differently.¹⁶ In brief, the Arabic *deen* (*dīn*) does not mean religion as it is so often translated; rather, it has a meaning more akin to culture. Moreover, through the frame of the *ahl al-kitāb*, or people of the book, Muslims delimited the world in very different ways. If Christians and Jews, alongside Sabians and Zoroastrians (and, for some Muslims, also Buddhists, Hindus, and others) are *ahl al-kitāb*, they are amongst those who have submitted to God and so *muslims*, the italicized lowercase denoting not a WRP framing, but that in tune with the wider Islamic conception—i.e., those who do *islām*, surrender or submit to God. All have books and prophets in the same lineage and the same teaching as that descending from Adam and culminating in Muhammad. In WRP terms, we may say that there is only one religion, Islam, even though, through human forgetfulness and other means, there are many distorted versions of it and only one lineage was maintained intact. Again, within the Sinitic worldview, we see what has been described as strategic religious participation (SRP) in a shared religious landscape (SRL), such that an essential unity of cosmology and connection underlies even the differences, which finds manifestation in the well-known, and touted under imperial decree as well as in both elite and popular forms, conception of the *sanjiao*, or three traditions. Within this frame, no contradiction exists between identifying with and using Buddhist, Confucian, and Daoist practices and concepts, for each most strongly relates to a specific realm of life. The WRP boxes of discrete traditions simply cannot encapsulate the SRP in an SRL conception. Such awareness of the contextual frame of “religion” can help decolonize our perspective. To speak, in WRP terms, of a world with many religions, each as discrete traditions that exist in hermetically sealed units of meaning, and where syncretism is unnatural and erroneous, does not neutrally describe the territory. Using J. Z. Smith’s imagery, the map may indeed be a very inaccurate guide to the terrain.¹⁷ The map may indeed keep us within what Syed Hussein Alatas called the “captive mind” where we remain bound by Western modes of thinking.¹⁸ Importantly, in this context, the

¹⁵ On the material turn in the study of religion, see most especially the following three sources: Manuel Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); David Morgan, *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); and, Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 209–31. More broadly, on materiality and the material turn, see Daniel Miller, “Materiality: An Introduction,” in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 1–50, and Michael Rowlands, “A Materialist Approach to Materiality,” in Miller, *Materiality*: 72–87. Readers are asked to note Hedges’ injunction that just because particular authors discuss the body or materiality does not mean that the material turn is fully realised or taken seriously in their work, for it is not simply about a change of topic, but how we think materiality, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 225, and also 211.

¹⁶ What follows is adapted from the following sources. On Islam: Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 39–45; Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2010); and, Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 21–22, 304–06. On China: Hedges, “Multiple Religious.”

¹⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

¹⁸ See Syed Farid Alatas, “Captive Mind,” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (2016) <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosc006.pub2>. Notably, my usage differs from Alatas’ in that his focus was on previously colonized peoples who remain enthralled by the cultural-ideological frames of their former colonizers; I, however, use it within a broader decolonizing frame to suggest that the imagined Western frames often hold us all captive.

term “syncretism” has taken on negative connotations for the study of religion, learned from theological assumptions, but also the embeddedness of the WRP as our operating frame.¹⁹ What if there is a natural porousness between those things we term religions? What if we think them decolonially and interreligiously as inherently syncretic and marked more by blending than our normal frames allow—the frame that seems to form a border, may actually be a bridge. Our brief discussion therefore of how *what* we term “religion” would be framed differently *elsewhere* helps lay a basis for recognizing what we do not see when we determine that a piece of art belongs to just one religion (in whose terms, under what definitional frames, at what cost, and so on).

Looking at Religion and Culture in a Decolonial and Interreligious Frame in the Context of Art

Returning to some of the images discussed already (Images 2, 3, 4), some may argue that what we see here is only the different cultural expression of Buddhism, i.e., the works of art are merely cultural manifestations of the same essentialist core of that “religion”. But this is to apply modern, colonial categories to the statues and how we interpret them. Moreover, we cannot so easily make a division between what we see and what we think. Ideas and our embodiment as human beings are not distinct.²⁰ This could be unpacked further, but suffice it to say here that images, sensory experiences, and physical environments play a huge part in how we think and what we think, far more than we often realize. Importantly, what the art shows us is that a conceptual change has occurred.

In the earliest Buddhist tradition, the ineffability of the Buddha’s experience was seen as unrepresentable, but this is now believed as capable of being shown. Indeed, as Buddhist art developed, very precise requirements became mandated in terms of how the Buddha was presented such that through seeing the statue we would see into the realm of nirvana itself. This idea was something found in what we term Hindu aesthetics. In *darshan*, inadequately translated as worship, we both see the deity and are seen by the deity.²¹ The physical form is itself something that partakes in the reality to which it points. Now, I do not want to say that artistic forms led to this development. However, as what becomes known as Mahayana Buddhism develops, the state of nirvana is said to be not separable from samsara, our current physical reality of lived experience—whereas it seems that in both early Buddhist traditions and modern Theravada Buddhism, nirvana, our release and awakening, is held to be utterly distinct from samsara, which justifies the aniconic approach—notwithstanding that Theravada devotion, as much as Mahayana, embraces devotion to statues. It is not the place of this paper to trace the connections of artistic changes alongside conceptual changes, and it would be naïve to expect a clear correspondence between them. But when we do not imagine religions, or religio-cultural

¹⁹ For a discussion on syncretism and related terms, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 72–79.

²⁰ This is not the place to argue this through, but see note 15 above on the material turn, while following Maurice Merleau-Ponty the effect of our embodiment on our thinking is increasingly acknowledged, and Bruno Latour has also noted the agency of things within our world. This is argued through in Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 221–25, but see also Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge, 1962 [1948]); and, Bruno Latour, “On Interobjectivity,” *Mind, Culture and Activity* 3.4 (1996): 228–45.

²¹ The classic study remains Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

worlds, as distinct and discrete spheres, but naturally permeable and inherently syncretic, then the argument is that in a place such as Gandhara we do not simply see Buddhists learning sculpting styles from Greek cultural influence; rather, we also see a conceptual exchange of ideas. This shift in argument or framing becomes far more readily transparent.

Embedded within this question is a wider conceptual one, viz., whether and how we distinguish culture and religion as two distinct spheres.²² The distinction lies within a theological realm, and we see it represented, for instance, in the arguments of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in China in what are often termed the Terms Controversy and the Rites Controversy: for the former, can indigenous Chinese words be used for God, or must new language be created; for the latter, can Chinese converts to Christianity maintain their sacrifices to parents and Confucius as cultural forms of respect, or are these religious worship.²³ For instance, one contemporary theological response to solve this is to transfer “the nature of the issue of ancestral worship from the perspective of *Gospel and cultures*, instead of as an issue of *Gospel and religions*.”²⁴ While critical religion today argues that religion is simply one aspect within human culture, this simplistic and problematic rendering of culture as a master category solves very little.²⁵ Nevertheless, culture remains a key conceptual category, not only theologically, but within the secular framing of art, including religious art. We see in our images (2,3,4) differing cultural forms that Buddhist imagery can take, but without considering the wider ideological-philosophical matrix that underlies this.

Crucially, in this debate we must understand that not only does “religion” have no agreed upon critical scholarly definition, but the same also applies to “culture”.²⁶ Certainly, the distinction as to what falls within “culture” and what falls under “religion” is more of a confessional/theological distinction than an analytical/scholarly distinction.²⁷ However, within this paper the problematic of the distinction lies within the perception that these two can be separated, such that as in art a Buddha statue may take on “merely” cultural forms somehow divorced from the “religious” meaning. If we accept that no *sui generis* category of “religion” exists, then religious activity lies within the realm of human culture.²⁸ As has been observed above, the physical, material, and embodied forms of art, imagery, statutes, symbolism, etc. are not to be understood apart from a conceptual-linguistic realm wherein meaning is debated, as such the material (cultural) and conceptual (religion) do not exist as separate realms of activity or meaning. Indeed, when we consider that “culture” is not simply a static thing “possessed” by any

²² On the distinction within the study of religion, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 24–25, 30, 39–41.

²³ For a general overview, see Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 21–33.

²⁴ Lung-Kwong Lo, “The Nature of the Issue of Ancestral Worship among Chinese Christians,” *Studies in World Christianity* 9.1 (2003): 30–42, 39, italics in original. A shift from the language of “worship” to “veneration” also represents the theological differentiation, see Paul Hedges, “The Harmony of Confucianism and Christianity? Reflections on a Dialogue in South Korea,” *Interreligious Insight* 16.1 (2018): 18–31.

²⁵ Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 30.

²⁶ On these debates, see for example: John Baldwin, Sandra Faulkner, and Michael Hecht, “A Moving Target: The Illusive Definition of Culture,” in *Redefining Culture: Perspectives across the Disciplines*, ed. John Baldwin, Sandra Faulkner, Michael Hecht, and Sheryl Lindsley (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2006); and Chris Barker, *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2004). It is a debate that has ranged over decades, with some questioning whether the term “culture” has any viable academic usage.

²⁷ On the debate over the *sui generis* category of religion, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 30.

²⁸ See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 24–26.

society/people, but rather a more fluid and changing production of those peoples who compose that society, then we find it harder still to imagine two reified blocks such as “culture” and “religion” that could both exist as things in any context. Rather, both are part of the production of the people in their environment.²⁹

While being more conceptually and analytically powerful after the material turn, recognizing that art is interreligiously charged and significant also leads to a decolonized perspective. While, within a Western frame, religion and culture are conceptualized as two discrete worlds of meaning—as noted, seen within the way that museums may display works within the paradigms of “world religions”—we can elsewhere and otherwise see a world where interreligious crossings are differently envisaged. We briefly noted above that neither the Islamicate world nor those infused by Sinitic influence would traditionally view the world through the eyes of the WRP. The space of this paper does not permit reflection on a more decolonized theory of religion or a decolonized definition of culture.³⁰ Yet, if we do not follow the Western *sui generis* conception of religion, then understanding that what we term culture and religion overlap (without necessarily conflating them to sameness) frees us from the captive mind, rather than (especially within a theological mode) suggesting that a religion-culture binary helps solve problems.³¹

Some Examples of the Interreligious Nature of Art

Turning to some Christian iconography may help us see the issues behind such a debate more clearly. The Isenheim altarpiece is one of the most famous and powerful examples of the crucifixion (image linked in footnote).³² It was originally placed within the chapel of a hospital for patients suffering from what was known as St. John’s Fire, and, there, patients could see their God suffering with them, with Jesus’ pain fully portrayed. However, for around the first five hundred years of the Christian tradition, we can find no images of the crucifixion. When Jesus does start to be portrayed on the cross, we also see something very different, viz., what can be described as a representation of Christ in glory as resurrected Lord triumphing over death. This fitted with the belief, embodied in orthodox Christian teaching, and espoused at Chalcedon, that Jesus as God could not suffer, while it was not our role to see him in our suffering and he in ours,

²⁹ Such a view of culture is in line with Bourdieu’s views on cultural production, see for example, Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993). It also aligns with broader thinking on culture as a product of society rather than an object “possessed” by a society, see, for example, Wendy Griswold, *Cultures and Societies in a Changing World*, 4th edition (London: Sage), 47–68.

³⁰ Work towards the former, though, can be found in such places as Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, and Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*. The latter has not been a discrete concern yet of the study of religion or interreligious studies.

³¹ Of course, within a particular confessional-theological frame such a distinction may be extremely useful, and it may have pragmatic employment at times, but the concern of this paper is within a scholarly-analytic context.

³² For a discussion of this painting within a wider interreligious frame, see Paul Hedges, “The Body(Sattva) on the Cross: A Comparative Theological Investigation of the Theology of the Cross in the Light of Chinese Mahayana Suffering Bodhisattvas,” *Journal of Buddhist-Christian Studies* 36 (2016): 133–48. Specifically on the Isenheim altarpiece, see Barbara A. Hinze, “Saint Anthony’s Fire and AIDS: two altarpieces and the oft-forgotten goals of medicine,” *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics* 9:6 (2007): 455–59. The image may be accessed here: <http://photos1.blogger.com/blogger/3460/1493/1600/Grunewald.jpg> (accessed February 27, 2024).

but rather to see ourselves redeemed through victory over death.³³ These differing depictions of Jesus, therefore, show very different theological ideas. It is not simply a cultural difference, but a massive ideological change. The Isenheim portrait, we may say, would be heretical within the frame of Chalcedonian orthodoxy and the theology of Christ's victory, for it shows a God who suffers, something which Paul Badham argued shows contemporary (evangelical) Christianity—which accepts God's suffering—as a new religion in comparison to the older Christian tradition.³⁴ In Gandhara, we are aware of cultural flows, but we do not know the ideology of those creating these images of Buddha, whereas with the Isenheim altarpiece we have a much richer and fuller picture of the context.

Again, with some contemporary works of art, we also know that what we are seeing is not simply a different cultural representation, but something more. The images of Jesus where we see him portrayed in the style of Shiva Nataraja shows Jesus not simply within an Asian cultural imagining in its style, as though a new cultural plan were laid over old theology.³⁵ Rather, the Indian Christian artist Jyoti Sahi has deliberately employed indigenous Indian forms in paintings such as “Jesus, Lord of the Dance,” which has resonance with Shiva Nataraja, Shiva as Lord of the Dance.³⁶ Elsewhere, I have explored resonances of this Lord of the Dance imagery within Christian worship and theology, with not just Jyoti's work but the Christian hymn “Lord of the Dance” being inspired, in part at least, by the Nataraja imagery, and an understanding that Jesus too is a Lord of the Dance.³⁷ For many, this image is deeply controversial. It may be seen as taking syncretic religious symbols which do not belong in Christianity. I will not enter the territory of theological disputes on this matter, but they are out there. Rather, my argument is that our framing of religion, especially through the WRP and its theological presuppositions, leads us to see this as problematic, with syncretism being understood as erroneous. Such a theological judgement may be made, but any religious tradition is always and only embedded within its ideological-cultural and socio-political world. This means it is not simply responding to those cultural forms, but also ideologically—and so we may say philosophically-religiously—being shaped by them. The very act of making an image of Buddha is to say something about what Buddhahood means, and the representation of Jesus in pain on the cross is itself a theological interpretation of Jesus and his work. In other words, despite the oft-professed distinction of religion and culture, including in theological language, some representations of cultural forms are seen to be more than that already. We must recognize that this is the case far more often than we typically envisage it. The WRP and the normal representation of museums, which reflects this, hides the very syncretic border crossings and syncretism inherent in all religion (and religious art), for all religion is interreligious. Very often, the language of culture

³³ On the passion and crucifixion in art, see Richard Harries, *The Passion in Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 6ff; Richard Viladesau, *The Beauty of the Cross: The Passion of Christ in Theology and the Arts from the Catacombs to the Eve of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

³⁴ Paul Badham, “Contemporary Christianity as a New Religion,” *Modern Believing* 40.4 (1999): 17–29. The notion of God as suffering goes, though, further back to this late medieval devotionalism of either sharing God's suffering in some way or seeing as God suffering with us.

³⁵ The image of Jyoti Sahi's “Jesus, Lord of the Dance,” directly referred to here can be found here: <http://jyotiartashram.blogspot.com/2007/10/jesus-lord-of-dance.html> (accessed February 27, 2024). A typical image of Shiva Nataraja can be found at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1987-0314-1 (accessed February 27, 2024).

³⁶ Sahi, Jyoti, *The Child and the Serpent: Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols* (London: Arkana, 1990 [1980]).

³⁷ Paul Hedges, “Lived Religion as Hermeneutical Comparative Theology: Employing Shiva Nataraja (Lord of the Dance) Imagery in Christian Art and Music,” *CrossCurrents* 71.2 (2021): 156–74.

versus religion as discrete realms becomes the frame that hides what we may otherwise see. It shows border crossings that undermine the Western (colonial) model of “religion” by making clear that religious worlds are inherently syncretic borderlands that do not conform to the WRP expectations.³⁸

Elsewhere, I have explicated this via the story of Josaphat and Barlaam, the tale of how the Buddha’s life story led to him becoming first a revered Sufi figure and then a Christian saint. The mythology of theological uniqueness, or the borders of traditions as demarcated by the WRP, is skewered irreparably by such a story.³⁹ Perhaps, my critics will say, it is a one off, an anomaly, the exception that proves the rule (an absurd contradiction in terms despite its popularity as a saying). Yet, my argument herein is that every work of art we see also breaks these walls down. Jesus in the manger with the shepherds, a Gospel image and so we may say entirely Christian, is, when we think contextually, a reference to the Mithraic story.⁴⁰ The halos of angels, Jesus, saints, bodhisattvas, gods, devas, and so many more shows that common images of what it

³⁸ On border crossings and borderlands, see Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987).

³⁹ Hedges, “Interreligious Encounters.” On this story, see Donald Lopez and Peggy McCracken, *In Search of the Christian Buddha: How an Asian Sage Became a Medieval Saint*, New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Co., 2014. A brief, accessible account can be found at: Almond, Philip, “How the Buddha Became a Christian Saint,” *The Conversation* (12 July 2020), <https://theconversation.com/how-the-buddha-became-a-christian-saint-142285> (accessed February 28, 2024).

⁴⁰ The exact connection of Mithras, and other figures such as Orpheus, to how Jesus was understood and represented is a matter of debate. The development of the idea that Jesus’ birthplace was actually a cave seems deeply tied into Mithras imagery (see, e.g., Michael Gervers, “The Iconography of the Cave in Christian and Mithraic Tradition,” in Ugi Bianchi, ed., *Mysteria Mithrae*, Leiden: E.J. Brill: 579–99), even if this may not reflect the Gospel imagery. But, with respect to Orpheus, the pastoral scene of Jesus’ birth is seen to have clear resonances (on some connections here, see J. Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978). That developments in Jesus’ representation as a deity was influenced by widely “Pagan” sources is well argued by scholars such as Bart Ehrman, though it remains contested (see Bart Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee*, New York, NY: HarperOne, 2014). Whatever the case, mainstream art history notes that: “The ingenuity of early Christian artisans in turning a host of pagan symbols and images to the service of a new ideology is one of the most conspicuous features of Christian art during the second and third centuries,” and it is noted that this “is responsible for the art of the catacombs in which Orpheus the charmer of wild beasts represents Christ the Good Shepherd” (John Friedman, “Syncretism and Allegory in the Jerusalem Orpheus Mosaic,” *Traditio* 23 (1967): 1–13, 1); though, notably, against often heard arguments that Orpheus formed the shepherd model, there is reason to doubt this particular association (see Giulia Marchioni, *Gathering the Shepherds: Uses and Meanings of Pastoral Imagery and Shepherding Metaphors between 3rd and 6th Centuries*, PhD thesis, University of Bologna, 2018, available at: http://amsdottorato.unibo.it/8494/1/Giulia_Marchioni_Tesi.pdf [accessed February 27, 2024]). That from around the third century, many church fathers contested this usage of “Pagan” imagery, and we hear complaints against such artistic conceptions or else calls for a Christian art suggests that the common assertions that it was not merely cultural-symbolic dressing and not actually ideological-theological context that was the issue at stake. Certainly we see questions being asked that point towards this, but which suppose the blending is unnatural as “syncretism”—for example, asking about “the very curious syncretism of the mosaic” (Friedman, “Syncretism and Allegory,” 3), but for many the crossover seemed natural, so when it is asked “What is Orpheus doing in a Christian tomb of this late date [C6 CE]?” it is within a context where Orpheus was “frequently to be compared with Christ and sometimes to be conflated with him” (Friedman, “Syncretism and Allegory,” 3, 4). While there was conceptual overlap, we must be aware of assuming that what was occurring in art was only, somehow, “cultural” and so not associated with the conceptual and theological reflection on who Jesus and Orpheus might be, and the wider thinking of Jesus through the lens of Mithras and Orpheus seems naïve. Orpheus’ descent into Hades, especially when presented as a Christ-type would tell a story about who Jesus was, what he did, and what he achieved.

meant to be divine was shared between these traditions.⁴¹ To claim that this is “only artistic” or a “cultural form” holds not the least analytic weight. It starts by making religion something *sui generis*, an exception outside of culture, apart from the material world and simply an inhabitant of the world of disembodied idealist essences. Yet, as has been pointed to here, every material image is itself conceptual, it is theological, it is Buddhological, it is Christological, and so on.

Reflections in Lieu of a Conclusion: Museum Displays and Thinking Interreligiously

While this paper is conceptual, it arguably has implications for how we think about the display of religious artefacts in museums. Even though it has not directly engaged the literature on this, being more of a conceptual discussion, there is clearly both conceptual and practical crossover with what occurs in museum studies, in museum curation, and in how we conceptualize religious art in the museum.⁴² The problem of labelling is clearly a part of this. The notion of collections, rooms, or displays dedicated to single religious traditions may fail to reflect the way that some art is inherently syncretic, and while a piece may be claimed by, or created by, a specific lineage tradition associated with a named religion, if we isolate it as such then we fail to understand that not merely syncretism but even an interreligious exchange or implicit dialogue underlies that work of art. The boxes of the WRP hide and efface the very syncretic and interreligious nature of all religion, and how we speak better about this is a task for scholars, museum curators, and many more, especially if we take the task of decolonizing seriously. While the aim of this article is more conceptual than practical, there are clearly implications about how both specific works of arts, galleries, special exhibitions, and collections are displayed, with a need for museum curators to take on board the critique of the WRP. Also, while pointing to the problem of displaying art under specific tradition-centric terminology, it is not the case that this will always be illegitimate, and there may be good reason at times and places to label certain art, exhibitions, or galleries as “Buddhist”, “Christian”, “Islamic” and so on. However, the argument here is about what is lost when this is done.⁴³ If we return to Image 1, in one sense we see an entirely imaginative image, which played no part in the lives of hidden Christians, but, for at least some Christians, *Budasif*, the young bodhisattva, was seen to be somebody whose religious life and practice exemplified what it meant to follow the example of the teacher from Galilee who died upon the cross. The actual story of religious art, and religious practice, crosses far more borders than we may imagine, and in every religious artefact we never see only one religious tradition exemplified, but instead we witness part of a global story of interreligious encounters, sharing, and even religion as it only ever is: syncretic, blended, and interreligious.



⁴¹ See Chumak, Maria, “Influences of the East on Early Christian Iconography,” *Open Journal for Studies in History* 3.1 (2020), pp. 11–24. See also, Soper, Alexander, “Aspects of Light Symbolism in Gandhāran Sculpture,” *Artibus Asiae* 12.3 (1949), pp. 252–83.

⁴² See the references in note 2, and also Hedges, “Interreligious Encounters,” and Meegama, “Curating the Christian.”

⁴³ For a discussion and references on debates, see note 11.

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