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SCRIPTS, SAINTS, AND SCIENTISTS: THE SOCIAL LIFE OF GOSPEL BOOKS IN AN ARMENIAN MUSEUM

KONRAD SIEKIERSKI

ABSTRACT: In this article, I explore the social life of Armenian Christian Gospel Books in the Matenadaran (the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts) in Yerevan, Armenia. In this state repository, research center, and museum, manuscript Gospel Books have become precious pieces of tangible national heritage. They have been protected, renovated, studied, and displayed as objects that exemplify the Armenian unique artistic and literary tradition. However, some of these manuscripts have resisted secularisation while preserving the traditional roles of the powerful sacred objects venerated by Armenian Christians. Consequently, they have been attracting not only visitors but also pilgrims to the Matenadaran. Furthermore, since the early 2000s, five of them have been temporarily released from the Institute to participate in religious feasts of the Armenian Apostolic Church, when they attract crowds of pilgrims. This article builds on a material religion and museum studies approach to examining what these Gospel Books are, what they do, and how they relate to people in post-socialist Armenia, where the formation of the sacred and secular is partially shaped by Soviet legacies of desecration, museumification, and heritagization of religion.

KEYWORDS: Armenia, Christianity, anthropology of religion and secularism, museum studies

When I work with manuscripts, I think of them as historical sources. But when I take one of them to the church, it becomes a sacred object in my hands . . .

An employee of the Matenadaran

A few years ago, on the Sunday after Easter,¹ I visited the church of St. George (in Armenian, *Surb Gevorg*)² in Mughni, located a short distance from Armenia's capital city, Yerevan. This is a popular pilgrimage day when people in this part of the country visit their local shrines and churches. However, what I saw

1. In Armenian Christianity, this feast is known as *Krknazatik* (Repeat Easter) or *Kanach Kiraki* (Green Sunday).

2. I use a simplified romanization of Armenian script, which avoids diacritics but does not strictly follow any scientific style of transliteration.

in Mughni exceeded my expectations. I encountered a crowd of pilgrims gathered in and around the church. The main reason for their visit was to venerate the Shurishkan Gospels (Mat. 10599)³—a late fifteenth-century manuscript book brought to Mughni for this one day from the Matenadaran (the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts) in Yerevan.⁴

When I went to the Matenadaran later to learn more about this book, I saw an Armenian family entering an exhibition hall where the Shurishkan Gospels was on display. Soon I realized that they were not visitors who wanted to learn more about Armenian manuscripts, but pilgrims who had come to pray and ask the book for its support and protection. To my surprise, they persuaded a museum guard to open the glass display case, touched the manuscript with great reverence, and placed photographs of a young soldier and other family members beneath its cover.⁵

Prompted by these two encounters, I ask what the Shurishkan Gospels and other similar books are, what they do, and what their “cultural biographies”⁶ can reveal about today’s religiosity in Armenia, where the formation of the sacred—understood both in religious and national terms—is at least partially shaped by Soviet legacies of desecration, “museumification,” and “heritagization” of religion. In other words, I inquire about the “social life”⁷ of these “things-in-motion [as they] illuminate their human and social context.”⁸

To address the questions of what the Matenadaran does with Gospel Books and what these books do in today’s Armenia, I draw on recent research on the

3. Whenever possible, I include the information about the location and classification of the discussed Gospel Books. Mat. stands for the Matenadaran—the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscript, followed by a number assigned to the manuscript in the Institute’s catalog.

4. The Armenian word *matenadaran* means a “repository of manuscripts.” Written with a capital letter, it has become synonymous with the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts. For this reason and the sake of brevity, in this article I use the terms Matenadaran and Institute interchangeably.

5. I first became acquainted with the Shurishkan Gospels in 2014. However, most of the materials I use in this article come from my fieldwork in the Matenadaran in winter 2018/2019. During this time, I met with the employees who interact with pilgrims coming to the Institute, accompany the Gospel Books taken to religious feasts, and approach these books themselves as miraculous objects. I also talked with clergymen and believers of the Armenian Apostolic Church who organize and attend religious feasts, where the Institute’s manuscripts are present. To respect their privacy, in this article I do not give names but rather stick to more general terms such as “employee,” “staff member,” or “priest.” Here, I would like to thank each and all of them for their generous cooperation and the time they offered to me.

Furthermore, I participated in all five annual feasts for which selected Gospel Books are released from the Matenadaran. In this way, I could feel a general atmosphere of these events. I watched how pilgrims venerate the manuscripts as well as in what other religious and non-religious activities they engage. I also observed how those present at the feasts—pilgrims, priests, delegates of the Matenadaran, and so forth—interact with each other. Such research, based on informal interactions and first-hand experience, allowed me a close look at the veneration of Gospel Books in modern Armenian Christianity.

This research was supported by scholarships from the London Arts and Humanities Partnership and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

6. Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–94.

7. Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things*.

8. Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things*, 5.

heritagization of religion⁹ and the museumification of religious objects.¹⁰ Building on Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte's work, I pay attention to 'two processes [. . .] at the heart of the interplay between the fields of "heritage" and "religion," namely the heritagization of the sacred and the sacralization of heritage.¹¹ In particular, I trace those instances in which heritagization has not brought about a profanation, or the loss of religious sanctity, for some Gospel Books permanently or temporarily held in the Matenadaran.

I start by offering a short historical overview of the devotional culture surrounding the Gospel Books in Armenian Christianity. I then turn to the Soviet and post-Soviet museumification and heritagization of religious books that took place within the Matenadaran but not stopped some Gospel Books from being venerated as sacred objects. Finally, I discuss the recently established practice in which selected Gospel Books from the Institute meet with believers during annual religious feasts of the Armenian Apostolic Church.¹²

GOSPEL BOOKS IN ARMENIAN CHRISTIANITY

As in other strands of Christianity, the Holy Scripture plays a central role in the teaching and religious practice of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Liturgically speaking, the Gospel placed in the center of the main altar in the Armenian church

9. André Bakker, "Shapes of 'Culture' and the Sacred Surplus: Heritage Formation and Pentecostal Conversion among the Pataxó Indians in Brazil," *Material Religion* 9, no. 3 (2013): 304–27; Duane Jethro, "An African Story of Creation: Heritage Formation at Freedom Park, South Africa," *Material Religion* 9, no. 3 (2013): 370–93; Birgit Meyer and Marleen de Witte, "Heritage and the Sacred: Introduction," *Material Religion* 9, no. 3 (2013): 274–81.

10. Maria Paula Adinolfi and Mattijs van de Port, "Bed and Throne: The 'Museumification' of the Living Quarters of a Candomblé Priestess," *Material Religion* 9, no. 3 (2013): 282–303; Bruno Brulon Soares, "Every Museum Has a God, or God Is in Every Museum?" *ICOFOM Study Series* 47, nos. 1–2 (2019): 57–72, <https://journals.openedition.org/iss/1358>; Gretchen Buggeln, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate, "Introduction: Religion in Museums, Museums as Religion," in *Religion in Museums: Global and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. Gretchen Buggeln, Crispin Paine, and S. Brent Plate (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1–7; Denis Byrne, "Museums, Religious Objects, and the Flourishing Realm of the Supernatural in Modern Asia," in *Religion in Museums*, ed. Buggeln, Paine, and Plate, 72–79; Matías Cornejo González, "Museum Performativity and the Agency of Sacred Objects," *ICOFOM Study Series* 47, nos. 1–2 (2019): 73–87, <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/1413>; François Mairesse, "The Sacred in the Prism of Museology," *ICOFOM Study Series* 47, nos. 1–2 (2019): 15–22, <http://journals.openedition.org/iss/1286> [last accessed 23 August 2020]; Crispin Paine, *Religious Objects in Museums: Private Lives and Public Duties* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); Bruce M. Sullivan, ed., *Sacred Objects in Secular Spaces: Exhibiting Asian Religions in Museums* (London and New York: Bloomsbury 2015); Helena Wangefelt Ström, "How Do Museums Affect Sacredness? Three Suggested Models," *ICOFOM Study Series* 47, nos. 1–2 (2019): 191–205, <https://journals.openedition.org/iss/1917>.

11. Meyer and de Witte, "Heritage," 277.

12. The Armenian Apostolic Church is the dominant religious institution in Armenia, where some 90 percent of population are its followers and where it enjoys the constitutionally guaranteed status of the National Church. The Church is a part of Oriental Orthodoxy—a group of ancient Churches that did not accept the Chalcedonian formulation on Christology adopted in the fifth century.

symbolizes the presence of the Word of God. Priests read from the Bible during religious services, hold it in processions, and use it for blessings.¹³ However, its special status goes further than this.

According to the tradition of the Apostolic Church, the Bible was the first book translated into Armenian, thanks to the Armenian alphabet, created—with God’s support—by St. Mesrob Mashtots in the early fifth century.¹⁴ From that time on, Armenian Christians commissioned Gospel Books as powerful votive offerings in order to bring salvation to and perpetuate memory about their sponsors, owners, and executors.¹⁵ Medieval sources attest that parish communities perceived Gospel Books as their most sacred members. When invaders kidnapped the book, the community could pay a ransom and free the captive.¹⁶ Some wealthy but childless individuals adopted a Book of Gospels as their “child in Zion.”¹⁷ As such, Gospel Books were an essential part of a busy network of creative activity and the exchange of material and spiritual goods in the Armenian Christian religious economy.¹⁸

For centuries, Armenian Christians have perceived individual copies of Gospel Books as endowed with miraculous and healing powers in an analogous way to how Orthodox Christians have viewed icons and Catholics approached figures of saints. An early attestation to this phenomenon comes from the late fourteenth-century colophon written in the so-called Red Gospels (Arm. *Karmir Avetaran*, Mat. 8771). The colophon describes how the book fled from invaders and several years later revealed in a dream its hideout to an Armenian cleric. Then the book performed many miracles and “healed all the sick and the blind and the demoniacs.”¹⁹ The belief in the extraordinary power of some Gospel Books is also attested by the custom (popular especially in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries) to attach ex-votos—crosses;

13. Krikor H. Maksoudian, “The Religion of Armenia,” in *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts*, ed. Thomas F. Mathews and Roger S. Wieck (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 34–37; Vrej Nersessian, *Treasures from the Ark: 1700 Years of Armenian Christian Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Trust Publications, 2001), 65.

14. Vrej Nersessian, *The Bible in the Armenian Tradition* (Los Angeles: Getty Trust Publications, 2001), 12–14.

15. Colophons—notes added by scribes, commissioners, owners, binders, or other people to the manuscripts, usually at their end—often include statements such as this one: “[I ordered this Gospel book] for my children and for the purification of my soul and that of my wife, in order that we may enjoy mercy on the day of his visitation [of the Lord]. I plead with you, who love Christ, so that when you read this Holy Gospel you will without fail beseech the Creator of everything to forgive all my sins; may the Lord Jesus Christ have mercy upon me” (Nersessian, *Treasures*, 66).

16. These personifying terms (to kidnap, to free a captive, etc.) were used in the colophons of such manuscripts.

17. Vrej Nersessian, *Awag Vank’ Gospels: Transcript of Audio* (London: British Library Online Gallery, 2007), <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/podvrejnersessian.html>.

18. Complete Bibles were copied much less frequently.

19. Avedis K. Sanjian, *Colophons of Armenian Manuscripts, 1301–1480: A Source for Middle Eastern History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 98–99.

eye-shaped, hand-shaped, or leg-shaped plaques; seal stones; jewelry; coins; and other objects—directly to their covers. These votive offerings established a direct connection between the book and those searching for its supernatural intervention and intercession.²⁰

Some Gospel Books have also become “home saints” (Arm. *tan surb*)—relics kept in people’s homes or private chapels. According to a popular belief, they protect households or entire villages and support those who come as pilgrims and make offerings to them.²¹ For example, long before it became part of the Matenadaran’s collection, the Shurishkan Gospels—one of the main protagonists of this article—had been a home saint in an Armenian village in Iran.²² As one nineteenth-century account tells us,

The village of Shurishkan is famous for its miraculous and healing manuscript Gospels. [. . .] It is protected by a family, who calls itself the guardians of the Gospels [. . .]. According to one story, when enemies attacked and plundered the village, the guardians hid the book in a water source, covered it with sand, and fled. When they came back, they found the Gospels dry and intact. [. . .] In times of trouble, the guardians of the book take it to New Jugha [an Armenian district of Isfahan]. There, people meet it with a great feast, [. . .] they come to see it, some of them barefoot, they kiss the manuscript, kill sheep next to it [. . .]. Many sick people come to the Gospels and [. . .] are cured.²³

20. Sylvie L. Merian, “Protection against the Evil Eye? Votive Offerings on Armenian Manuscript Bindings,” in *Suave Mechanicals: Essays on the History of Bookbinding*, Vol. 1, ed. Julia Miller (Ann Arbor: The Legacy Press, 2013), 43–93. Konrad Siekierski, “Kissing the Book, Making a Vow: An Illustrated Story of an Armenian Religious Practice,” *Folklife* 2020, <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/illustrated-story-of-armenian-religious-practice>; Konrad Siekierski “Gospel Books as Sacred Objects: The Veneration of Religious Manuscripts in Armenian Christianity,” in *Inspiration of God: The One-And-A-Half Millennia of the Armenian Bible and Religious Practice*, ed. Bálint Kovács and Vahé Tachjian (Budapest: L’Harmattan; Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2021), 68–75.

21. Silvia Ferriani, “I libri detti «santi della casa» (tan surber): primi risultati di una ricerca antropologica nella Repubblica d’Armenia,” *Rassegna degli Armenisti Italiani* XVI (2015): 25–32; Harutyun Marutyan, “‘Tan surb’ yerevuyty. Akunkneri harcy yev merorya drsevorumnery,” in *Hayots srber yev srbavayrer*, ed. Sargis Harutyunyan and Aram Kalantarian (Yerevan: Hayastan, 2001), 337–46; Harutyun Marutyan, “Home as the World,” in *Armenian Folk Arts, Culture, and Identity*, ed. Levon Abrahamian and Nancy Sweezy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 93; Merian, “Protection,” 53–55; Siekierski, “Kissing”; Siekierski, “Gospel.”

22. Tamar Gevorgyan, “Shurishkani avetarani gorcarutyuny parsakahayeri avandakan kencaghun,” in *Hayots srber yev srbavayrer*, ed. Sargis Harutyunyan and Aram Kalantarian (Yerevan: Hayastan, 2001), 411–13; Gevorg Ter-Vardanean, *Shurishkani avetarany (steghtsumy, ancacy yev nerkan)* (Yerevan: Vernatun, 2017). This Gospel Book was copied in 1498 in Aspinak village of Vaspurakan. A century later, it joined Armenians resettled by Shah Abbas I to central Persia, where it remained in the village of Shurishkan for almost 400 years. It came to Armenia and the Matenadaran in the early 1970s as a part of a repatriation campaign of Armenians from Iran.

23. Quoted after Ter-Vardanean, *Shurishkani*, 36–39.

THE MATENADARAN AND THE HERITAGIZATION OF THE GOSPEL BOOKS

In the seven decades (1920–1991) of communist rule in Armenia, thousands of Armenian Gospel Books and other religious manuscripts were nationalized and secularized by the Soviet state.²⁴ Their subsequent museumification and heritagization took a full swing after the Institute of Ancient Manuscripts was established in Yerevan in 1957 as a central state repository, research center, and museum of manuscripts and early printed books.²⁵ The Institute inherited collections confiscated in 1920 and subsequent years from the Armenian Apostolic Church's headquarters in Etchmiadzin,²⁶ as well as from churches, monasteries, and private houses around the country. In later decades, the Institute purchased or received as donations hundreds more Armenian manuscripts, and today it owns the world's most extensive collection of this kind.²⁷

The establishment of the Matenadaran as *the* place for Armenian manuscripts in the heart of the Armenians' Soviet homeland was rooted in a larger socio-political project of "apricot socialism."²⁸ In cultural terms, an essential part of apricot socialism was a post-World War II turn to Armenian history, placed in the national frame but largely bereft of religious elements and integrated instead with official Soviet ideology. In this new context, the Gospel Books that had been earlier venerated as miraculous

24. Earlier phases of the secularization and museumification of religious manuscripts can be traced back at least to the eighteenth to nineteenth century. In that period, the Armenian Apostolic Church established the first Armenian museums with religious objects on display (Levon Abrahamian, *Armenian Identity in a Changing World* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 2006), 308–9) and collected from villages some Gospel Books venerated there as home saints. Armenian Catholic Mekhitarist monks traveled from Venice and Vienna to Armenian lands to acquire outstanding copies of manuscripts for their collections. Many other manuscripts entered museums and libraries outside the Armenian world; cf. Sukias Baronian and Frederick C. Conybeare, *Catalogue of the Armenian Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1918), vii.

25. In 1959, the Matenadaran was declared a research institute and in 1962 was named after Mesrop Mashtots.

26. The Etchmiadzin collection had 4,660 manuscripts in 1914. This number had undoubtedly increased by 1920 with a large amount of manuscripts saved by refugees from Western Armenia and clergymen sent to the Ottoman Empire to rescue libraries of monasteries abandoned during the Armenian Genocide (1915–early 1920s).

27. Of around 31,000 Armenian manuscript books gathered today in various collections, the Matenadaran owns over one third (more than 11,000). Out of the total number, some 5,000 are Gospel Books.

28. Maike Lehmann, "Apricot Socialism: The National Past, the Soviet Project, and the Imagining of Community in Late Soviet Armenia," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 1 (2015): 9–31. Lehmann writes mainly about political demonstrations in Armenia in 1965 and 1988–1989, but her concept of "apricot socialism" equally suits the discussion of cultural policies in Soviet Armenia. As she explains it, "apricot socialism refers to yet another variation of the revolutionary red in the Soviet everyday. The apricot, being the Armenian national fruit, whose skin often samples the whole color spectrum between crimson red and light orange, serves me as a metaphor for how people in Soviet Armenia imagined the rules and goals of the Soviet community" (Lehmann, 13).

objects were drained of their “supernatural agencies and enchantments.”²⁹ They were cut out of their history as divine agents and detached from the cultural context in which they could act and perform their religious deeds and duties.³⁰

As Matías Cornejo González puts it, “one could argue that, under a masquerade of neutrality or scientific objectivity [. . .], museums tend to deprive visitors of an understanding of sacred objects and the original performances that give them agency through their personhood condition.”³¹ But museums and research institutes such as the Matenadaran do not merely empty religious objects through their disenchanting and secularizing discourses and practices. They rather create them anew by placing them in different “webs of significance.”³² More precisely, they turn them into objects of the utmost cultural value and importance not only by collecting and displaying them, but by means of their heritagization.³³ Such “heritage formation involves [. . .] sacralization, through which cultural forms are lifted up and set apart”³⁴ for “modern contemplation and aesthetic inspiration.”³⁵

The books stored and displayed in the Matenadaran have been literally “lifted up and set apart”³⁶ by the Institute’s location above Yerevan’s city center. Its monumental building crowns the capital’s central avenue named after Stalin, then after Lenin, and—since 1990—after Mesrop Mashtots. The building offers a view of Mount Ararat (Armenia’s sacred mountain and national symbol) and is set at the foot of a gigantic monument of Mother Armenia (and, before 1967, of Stalin).³⁷ After climbing up the hill, a visitor to the Matenadaran passes through a massive bronze door, which is guarded by monuments of major figures of Armenian medieval culture.³⁸ Inside the building, he or she has more stairs to climb to reach three exhibition halls, the architecture of which resembles interiors of medieval Armenian churches (fig. 1).³⁹

29. Sally M. Promey, “Foreword: Museums, Religion, and Notions of Modernity,” in *Religion in Museums*, ed. Buggeln, Paine, and Plate, xx.

30. Byrne, “Museums.”

31. Cornejo González, “Museum,” 78.

32. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretations of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5.

33. Adinolfi and van den Port, “Bed,” 287.

34. Meyer and de Witte, “Heritage,” 275.

35. Promey, “Foreword,” xx.

36. Meyer and de Witte, “Heritage,” 275.

37. Abrahamian, *Armenian*, 312–13.

38. These are Toros Roslin, Grigor Tatevatsi, Anania Shirakatsi, Movses Khorenatsi, Mkhitar Gosh, and Frik. All of them happened to be churchmen or worked for the Church, but in front of the Matenadaran they are meant to personify the art of manuscripts’ illumination, philosophy, cosmology, history, jurisprudence, and poetry, respectively. Below them, another monument presents Mesrop Mashtots and Koryun, his disciple and chronicler, placed against the background of the Armenian alphabet. The story has it that, initially, Mashtots was supposed to be accompanied by Sahak Partev—his patron and the Catholicos of the Armenian Church. However, the idea of erecting a monument to the head of the Church was too much for the communist authorities.

39. Besides these three main exhibition halls, on lower floors of the museum there are other rooms where early printed books and Persian manuscripts are on display (as of 2019).

Fig. 1. The main exhibition hall of the Matenadaran. Photo by Konrad Siekierski, courtesy of the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts

Most of the objects in the central exhibition of the Matenadaran are religious manuscripts, primarily Gospel Books. Despite this significant presence of religious books, the Head of exhibition halls explained to me that

The principle adopted in 1957 was that the museum should present works from different disciplines of science and the most important authors from each discipline. This principle also rules today because this is the best way to show the development of Armenian culture. Here we have medical and law books, philosophical treatises, translations, and works of art.⁴⁰

Within such a taxonomy, the Gospel Books are usually confined to this last category. They are displayed closed, so that a visitor can admire their sumptuous covers, or open—to show their elaborate scripts, richly decorated Canon Tables, miniature illustrations of saints, and scenes from stories told by the Evangelists. A small plaque next to each manuscript gives the date and place for when and where it was copied, often followed by the name of a scribe and painter. Beyond these basics, they are “supposed more or less to speak for [themselves],”⁴¹ as no information is provided about their religious functions and the socio-historical context in which they were created and used. Rather, they are meant to be cherished for their artistic value, as

40. Conversation with Matenadaran employee, February 2019.

41. Wangefelt Ström, “How Do Museums,” 193.

priceless sources of historical knowledge, and as survivors from the past—witnesses to the centuries-long creativity and endurance of Armenians, despite persecutions and subjugation to foreign powers.⁴²

The Matenadaran is—as is any museum—“a place in which visions of culture and history are constructed.”⁴³ Consequently, its Gospel Books have been turned into objects of quasi-religious, national veneration of “sacralised art and culture.”⁴⁴ The Matenadaran was one of the Soviet flagship projects intended to make Yerevan a “repository of Armenian myths and hopes.”⁴⁵ While in the post-communist transition period Yerevan has lost some of its ideological luster, the Matenadaran preserved its status as one of the most recognizable Armenian institutions and important symbols of Armenian culture. As described a few years ago by its director, Hrachya Tamrazyan, it has become “our identity, our banner, and our coat of arms.”⁴⁶ Coming to the Mesrop Mashtots Institute is thus often perceived by Armenians as a pilgrimage to the shrine of national culture.⁴⁷ In this sense, the Matenadaran is one of the most potent Armenian examples of a museum as a “temple of secular faith that systematically excludes other sets of beliefs within its realm.”⁴⁸

However, for some Armenians, the Matenadaran is also a pilgrimage site and a shrine in the religious sense, a custody place of powerful relics of Christian faith. In the following section, I will turn to this—often hidden—face of the Institute.

RELIGION IN THE MUSEUM: THE MATENADARAN AS A RELIGIOUS SHRINE AND PILGRIMAGE SITE

As André Bakker observes, the disenchantment entailed by heritagization “produces an indelible source of tension, for it is never fully accomplished.”⁴⁹ It is always possible that some sacred objects in a museum “have enough strength to resist it”⁵⁰ and reveal their power to perform miraculous deeds.⁵¹ Similarly, there is no way a

42. Cf. Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, *The Missing Pages: The Modern Life of a Medieval Manuscript from Genocide to Justice* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2019).

43. Katarzyna Maniak, “Rzeczy znaczą różne rzeczy. Tożsamość obiektów w muzeach etnograficznych,” in *Ludzie w świecie przedmiotów, przedmioty w świecie ludzi. Antropologia wobec rzeczy*, ed. Agata Rybus and Maciej W. Kornobis (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2016), 114–15.

44. Promey, “Foreword,” xxi.

45. Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan through Peace and War* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 76.

46. Matenadaran. Mesrop Mashtots Research Institute of Ancient Manuscripts, <http://www.matenadaran.am/?id=127&lng=4#.XIalsBMzZN0>.

47. Abrahamian, *Armenian*, 87.

48. Cornejo González, “Museum,” 78.

49. Bakker, “Shapes,” 307.

50. Mairesse, “The Sacred,” 16.

51. Byrne, “Museums,” 75.

museum can stop visitors from bringing their “devotional baggage”⁵² with them and approaching displayed objects with prayers, pious gestures, and offerings.⁵³ Hence, these artifacts can be objects of both “*cultural use*” and “*cultural use*.”⁵⁴

In fact, a growing number of museums acknowledge and even support such religious perspectives and practices. They also cooperate with religious communities and consult them regarding exhibited items.⁵⁵ However, religious acts in exhibition halls also “rattle museum professionals and raise difficult questions about the display of such objects.”⁵⁶

The Matenadaran is one such museum where religious life pulsates under the secular, scientific, and national surface. There exists a tradition, which stretches back to communist times, that previous owners and other people can visit sacred books stored in the Institute’s repository. As Helen Evans, a curator in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, recalled her early 1980s experience:

I spent several days working at the Matenadaran [. . .]. On one of those days, [. . .] a man came into the room with a Matenadaran staffer to be shown another manuscript. Rather than opening it, he venerated the closed book. As I remember it, he raised the book to his face and kissed it several times. The Matenadaran staffers in the Soviet Era, when religion was discouraged, were embarrassed that I was seeing the work treated as a religious object. They encouraged the man to open it and look at the contents, but he refused. After venerating it, he left, and the Matenadaran staff relaxed.⁵⁷

Toward the end of the 1980s (and the Soviet era), John Greppin reported a similar occurrence, which, however, was met with quite a different reaction of the Institute’s employees. In his words, “three middle-aged peasants [. . .] came to Yerevan to visit relatives, and to see ‘their’ Bible. They brought flowers with them, and these they presented to the Bible, which was brought from the vault and shown to them with dignity by the understanding staff of the Matenadaran.”⁵⁸

During my fieldwork, I heard many similar stories from current employees of the repository. They recalled people coming to pray, bringing sick persons with them, and making votive offerings, as they would do in a shrine. I also met a woman, who recently handed in to the Matenadaran a Gospel Book her family venerated as their

52. Steph Berns, “Devotional Baggage,” in *Religion in Museums*, ed. Buggeln, Paine, and Plate, 83–91.

53. Mary Nooter Roberts, “Altar as Museum, Museum as Altar: Ethnography, Devotion and Display,” in *Religion in Museums*, ed. Buggeln, Paine, and Plate, 49–58.

54. Wangefelt Ström, “How Do Museums,” 203, italics in original.

55. Paine, *Religious*; Sullivan, *Sacred*.

56. Buggeln, Paine, and Plate, “Introduction,” 2.

57. Personal communication, March 2020.

58. John A. C. Greppin, “Archive of an Ancient Will,” *The Armenian Weekly*, October 22, 1988; and *London Times Literary Supplement*, September 9–15, 1988, 988, 990.

home saint. As she told me, she decided that the anniversary of the donation will be a day of the annual pilgrimage (Arm. *ukhti or*) to the book for her and her relatives.⁵⁹

The most visited and venerated book in the Matenadaran is the Shurishkan Gospels. Since the donation of this manuscript in 1973, it has been an object of pilgrimage to the Institute. According to one of the stories I heard in the Matenadaran,

Once an Armenian woman came here and told me that as a child—when she still lived with her parents in Iran—she was mute. Then they heard about the Shurishkan Gospels. They rented a house next to the place where the book was kept, and she took care of it day and night for a whole year. Finally, God listened to her prayers. She did not only start to speak but got married, gave birth to two children, and moved to Europe. One day she saw in a dream that the book is surrounded by darkness. This is why she traveled all the way from Sweden as a pilgrim to the Gospels. She asked me to show her the book. When I entered the door, she went first, made a few steps, and stopped right in front of it. I explained to her that we keep all manuscripts in the dark room for the sake of their protection because the light can harm them. She accepted this explanation and then took a golden chain with a cross from her neck and placed it on a cover. She asked me to keep it there for at least a few days. And she cursed anyone who would dare to steal it.⁶⁰

First stored in the repository, the Shurishkan Gospels has been on display in the museum of the Matenadaran since 2011. The decision to place the book in the exhibition was meant to facilitate access for pilgrims. However, its several relocations from one hall to another indicate that the Matenadaran has had difficulty finding a proper place for it. In the beginning, the Shurishkan Gospels stayed in a room on the first floor, where I saw it venerated by the family I described in the opening of this article. Perhaps to suppress such unauthorized contact, but also to separate pilgrims from the main flow of tourists, the book was subsequently moved to a small niche in one of the central exhibition halls. However, after an attempt by zealous pilgrims to take the Shurishkan Gospels out of the glass case, it was taken to the main part of the same exhibition hall, where it remains under constant surveillance. The only thing that differentiates the manuscript from other books on display is a decorative cloth (Arm. *shushpa*)—a recent votive offering—and an unmarked donation box. Anyone unfamiliar with the Shurishkan Gospels would hardly recognize that he or she stands in front of the most venerated book in Armenian Christianity today (fig. 2).

Besides pilgrims coming to the Matenadaran, there are also staff members of the Institute who approach the Shurishkan Gospels with their prayers, problems, and requests. As one of them admitted: “When the Shurishkan was in a repository, we were often going there. One of the employees was bringing the book, and we were

59. Conversation with a guardian of manuscript book-saint, Yerevan, November 2018.

60. Conversation with Matenadaran employee, December 2018.

Fig. 2. The Shurishkan Gospels at the exhibition in the Matenadaran. Photo by Konrad Siekierski, courtesy of the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts

praying. But now, when it is behind the glass, it is not the same anymore.”⁶¹ Another employee told me:

I was often going to the Shurishkan to kiss it and pray. But there was a time when I stopped going. Then, one girl who was working in the exhibition hall told me that

61. Conversation with Matenadaran employee, November 2018.

she had a dream. The Gospel asked her: “Why is Amalia not coming to me?” I got afraid and went to the Shurishkan. Since then, whenever I am in the exhibition hall, I visit the book.⁶²

The Shurishkan Gospels is the book to go to in the time of need for Matenadaran employees, but other manuscripts can also reveal their miraculous power. As one staff member told me, “When we have work to do, or we need protection, we take a Gospel, kiss it, pray, and go. Whoever has faith does so.”⁶³ The most striking example of how a Gospel Book can manifest its agency and supernatural qualities in the Matenadaran is the story about a manuscript brought a few years ago to the Institute for renovation:

We often put photographs inside Gospel Books when someone has a problem or is ill. One day someone brought photos and asked to put them in the Shurishkan. We were too lazy to go to the exhibition hall, so we placed them in a Gospel that we had here. We knew nothing about this book. Then it turned out that all the wishes of that family came true. More and more people were bringing us photos or were coming here and asking: “Can we place our pictures in that Gospel?” Sometimes, they were even choosing which page to put their photos on: “Put me next to [the illustration of] Christ, please.” Others were bringing letters or were simply coming to pray and kiss the book. There were so many pictures that we couldn’t even recognize all these people. But after some time, one of our colleagues had a dream. The Gospel said to her that it could not bear so many requests. So, we took all the pictures from the book. Perhaps the Gospel was right because really people were coming from all around. . . . When we told the owner about everything that happened, he said: “Of course, didn’t you know that this is a miraculous Gospel?”⁶⁴

As the above examples show, the Matenadaran is, despite its official secular-scientific character, an active pilgrimage site, a place where people—both visitors and employees—pray and where miracles happen. Some books permanently or temporarily located in the Institute resist their heritagization and secularization acting according to their religious roles, responding to people’s requests, and contacting them in dreams. The repertoire of Armenian Christian practices in the Matenadaran includes praying, touching, or kissing the books, and offering *ex-votos* to them. Some other pious acts, typical for Armenian Christianity, such as lighting candles or sacrificing animals for *matagh*,⁶⁵ are absent in the Matenadaran due to the lack of proper space. In turn, the custom of putting pictures inside or behind Gospel Books, while popular in the Matenadaran, is rarely, if ever, part of devotional practice focused on

62. Conversation with Matenadaran employee, November 2018. The name in the story was altered.

63. Conversation with Matenadaran employee, November 2018.

64. Conversation with Matenadaran employee, December 2018.

65. “Matagh” is an Armenian Christian benevolent tradition, which often takes the form of a food offering from a sacrificed animal.

books venerated as home saints. Such temporal physical contact between a picture (re)presenting a person in need and a powerful book seems to serve as a kind of equivalent to the bygone custom of attaching ex-votos to book covers.

In his study of religious objects at museum displays, Crispin Paine observes that “common [. . .] must be instances of people who pray, leave offerings, kiss icons or the like, against the museum’s rules. We very seldom hear about these, and often such behaviour must be known only to the museum attendants, never reaching management.”⁶⁶ This is precisely what happens in the Matenadaran, especially when pilgrims persuade attendants to allow them a close contact with a sacred book. However, such religious acts in museum space are not confined only to exhibition halls, and it is not only visitors who approach sacred objects with religious intentions. Instead, as I have highlighted, some staff members are of similar religious dispositions and perform similar devotional acts, which they combine with their secular-professional duties.

THE MATENADARAN’S BOOKS AND RELIGIOUS FEASTS IN ARMENIA

Religious practices encouraged and facilitated by museums within their premises or undertaken there by visitors at their own initiative have been addressed—albeit not in the post-Soviet context—by several scholars.⁶⁷ However, situations analogous to the one I discuss in this section seem rare and beyond the academic focus. Namely, in the case of the Matenadaran, some Gospel Books live their religious life not only within the Institute’s premises but outside of it as well, as they temporarily leave its walls and participate in religious feasts.

The question of the permanent return of religious books confiscated in Soviet times from the Armenian Apostolic Church or private owners has not been raised in post-Soviet Armenia. Apparently, the idea of the Matenadaran as the national treasury of manuscripts has been so deeply internalized by Armenian society that there are no voices for restitution, compensation, or the right to co-decide about their fate. The Armenian Church, which in the post-Soviet period took back many previously confiscated churches and monasteries, did not try to regain its manuscript collection or to influence how books from this collection are interpreted and presented in the Matenadaran. As the director of the ecclesiastic library in Etchmiadzin, the headquarters of the Church, commented on this issue,

There exists a law that we can claim what was taken from the Church. But in the case of manuscripts, it doesn’t make sense for us to take them back. We do not

66. Paine, *Religious*, 40.

67. Berns, “Devotional;” Nooter Roberts, “Altar;” Paine, *Religious*; Bruce M. Sullivan, “Reconsecrating the Icons: The New Phenomenon of Yoga in Museums,” in *Sacred*, ed. Sullivan, 35–48.

have proper conditions and financial means to take care of these manuscripts. If we need to use a given book, we write a letter to the Matenadaran, and we receive it. We do not think that it is important where they are—here or in Yerevan. We are one nation, and the most important thing is that the manuscripts stay in Armenia.⁶⁸

Thus, the Matenadaran has been spared the issues that nowadays face many museums in different parts of the world, where indigenous minorities, formerly colonized nations, or expropriated individuals and communities claim their rights—and sometimes have them acknowledged—to religious objects that once were taken from them.⁶⁹

Instead, a *modus vivendi* described by the head of the Church's library has been established, albeit not without reluctance from the Matenadaran. The Institute refused the first request to lend the Shurishkan Gospels, for example. It required the intervention of a respected bishop to have the book released.⁷⁰ The Matenadaran has also successfully blocked similar initiatives. As one of the Institute's employees told me, "Recently I had a call asking whether we have any Gospel Book from Aparan,⁷¹ because they would like to bring it for a local feast. I said that even if I knew about such manuscript, I would not tell [them] about it."⁷² This reluctant stance is explained by the fear that outside the Matenadaran the manuscripts may suffer from inappropriate conditions or zealous pilgrims touching and kissing them.

On several occasions, I also heard opinions in the Institute that the special veneration of particular copies of religious books is "superstition" or "pagan idolatry," which has nothing to do with "true" Christian faith. According to these voices, all Gospel Books should be the same for Christian believers, so there is no need to release precious manuscripts from the Institute. In this stance, it is easy to recognize a local version of modern iconoclasm, as discussed by Bruno Latour,⁷³ which "boxe[s] modern religion as belief"⁷⁴ and identifies venerated books as fetishes in the hands of the "naïve, credulous, or irrational."⁷⁵

68. Conversation with a priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Etchmiadzin, December 2018.

69. Chip Colwell, "The Sacred and the Museum: Repatriation and the Trajectories of Inalienable Possessions," *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, 2 (2014): 10–24; Mark O'Neill, "Museums and the Repatriation of Objects, 1945–2015," in *Religion in Museums*, ed. Buggeln, Paine, and Plate, 99–108; Paine, *Religious*, 45–52; Laura Peers, Lotten Gustafsson Reinius, and Jennifer Shannon, "Introduction: Repatriation and Ritual, Repatriation as Ritual," *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 5 (2017): 1–8.

70. Conversation with a priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Mughni, November 2018.

71. A town located some 50 km north from Yerevan.

72. Conversation with Matenadaran employee, March 2019.

73. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1999).

74. Promey, "Foreward," ix.

75. Michael B. Norton, "Reassembling the Sacred: Bruno Latour's Philosophy of Religion," a paper presented at the conference *Postmodernism, Culture and Religion 4: The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, Syracuse University, April 7–9, 2011, <https://pl.scribd.com/document/101720625/Reassembling-the-Sacred>.

Despite these objections, five books currently leave the Institute for religious reasons and spend a day in church.⁷⁶ Since 2002, the Shurishkan Gospels visits the church of St. George in Mughni on the Sunday after Easter. Since 2010, pilgrims can approach the Sangibaran Gospels (Mat. 10554)⁷⁷ in the church of St. Shoghakat in Etchmiadzin on the commemoration day of St. John the Baptist and Job the Righteous in early September. Since 2013, the Powerful (Arm. *Zoravor*) Gospels (Mat. 4060) goes on the 14th of May—the commemoration day of Movses Tatevatsi—to the church of the Holy Mother of God (Arm. *Surb Astvatsatsin*) in Yerevan.⁷⁸ The Shuhonts Gospels (Mat. 6436)⁷⁹ travels in the second week of October to the church of St. Mesrop Mashtots in Oshakan for the feast of the Holy Translators (Arm. *Surb Tarkmanchats*). Finally, an unnamed Gospel Book (Mat. 8785) visits the church of St. Sarkis in Yerevan during the feast dedicated to this saint, celebrated between mid-January and mid-February.⁸⁰

All five feasts share a similar scenario. In the morning, a priest comes to the Matenadaran and—accompanied by a delegated employee of the Institute and police officers—takes a Gospel Book to the agreed church. Greeted by pilgrims, he carries the manuscript in a festive procession to the temple⁸¹ (fig. 3). During the liturgy, the book stays on the altar. Later, it is placed in front of the altar or in a side chapel so that pilgrims can approach it with their prayers (fig. 4).

Most pilgrims come to the book once, but the most zealous return several times. They stop for a while in front of the book, pray, touch it with their hands or foreheads, and kiss it. Some do this on their knees. Many bring with them different objects—scarfs and handkerchiefs, prayer books, necklaces with crosses, or pictures of those in need—and rub them against the book cover. Sometimes they also leave gifts, most often embroidered cloths. Among pilgrims, it is not difficult to spot the sick and

76. Siekierski, “Kissing”; Siekierski, “Gospel.” In rare cases, other Gospel Books may be taken out from the Institute on special religious occasions. For example, the Zeytun Gospels (Mat. 10450) was one of the fourteen relics used in April 2015 during the Service of Canonization of the Martyrs of the Armenian Genocide held in Etchmiadzin (Zeitlian Watenpaugh, *The Missing*).

77. The oldest among the Gospel Books discussed here, this twelfth century manuscript took part in Shah Abbas I’s resettlement of Armenians to central Persia at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It stayed in the church of St. John the Baptist in the village of Sangibaran until 1972, when its inhabitants, together with their book, moved to Soviet Armenia.

78. The Powerful Gospels was created around the thirteenth to fourteenth century in the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia but gained its fame a few centuries later, after it was transferred to Yerevan. As attested by the author of the eighteenth century colophon, “[I] saw the mightiness of this Holy Gospel and there were many witnesses to its healing power.” Quoted after Arsen Harutyunyan and Arpine Simonyan, *Zoravor avetaran: patkeragirikh-usumnasirutyun* (Yerevan: Nahapet, 2016), 31.

79. The Shuhonts Gospels was copied in 1669 in New Julfa for a sponsor from the Armenian village of Shuhia in Persia, from which the manuscript took its name. In the nineteenth century, the book travelled with people from Shuhia to present-day Armenia.

80. This Gospel Book was copied in the seventeenth century in the monastery located where St. Sarkis church stands today. The feast of St. Sarkis is celebrated 63 days before Easter.

81. During the feast in the church of the Holy Mother of God in Yerevan, priests additionally perform the Blessing of the Four Corners of the World with the Powerful Gospels. The ritual takes place in the churchyard, next to a monument dedicated to Movses Tatevatsi.

Fig. 3. The Powerful Gospels during the commemoration day of Movses Tatevatsi in the Holy Mother of God church in Yerevan. Photo by Konrad Siekierski

disabled who come in the hope of being cured. When possible, they may ask to have affected parts of their body touched with the book. Some may also complain when a protective cloth covers the manuscript so that they cannot come in direct contact with it. All these practices point to a belief in the power of Gospel Books—the power “of making visible the invisible,”⁸² the power of making wishes come true, and the power that these books share with those who approach them. As one of the pilgrims to the Sangibaran Gospels explained briefly and to the point, “This is a powerful book, and I am here today to receive a whit of this power.”⁸³

Among the five manuscripts, the Shurishkan Gospels, the Powerful Gospels, and the Sangibaran Gospels are particularly renowned for their power. During their feasts, it is not uncommon to hear stories about miracles they performed:

The Sangibaran Gospels helped many sick people coming from different villages. They stayed in the church, sometimes for months, and were healed [. . .] The book took away fear from those who were frightened, took away illnesses from those who

82. Robert Orsi, “Material Children: Making God’s Presence Real Through Catholic Boys and Girls,” in *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Gordon Lynch, Jolyon P. Mitchell, and Anna Strhan (London: Routledge, 2012), 147.

83. Armenian Church “Gospel of Sangibaran Brought to St. Shoghakat Monastery,” uploaded September 5, 2011 YouTube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISLMMnp_eE4.

Fig. 4. Veneration of the Gospel Book during the feast of St. Sarkis in Yerevan, Photo by Konrad Siekierski

were sick. My grandfather was ill for many months. Then he went to the Sangibaran Gospels, and after a week he was healed and felt like a young man!⁸⁴

The Sangibaran, Shurishkan, and Powerful Gospels play the central role in their feasts, and for many pilgrims their presence is the main incentive to come. In contrast, the Shuhonts Gospels and the Gospel Book taken to the church of St. Sarkis are, so to speak, supporting actors in larger events. Especially in the case of the Shuhonts Gospels, the presence of an ancient and precious manuscript fits neatly into the overall character of the feast dedicated to the Holy Translators—a group of the most influential figures in medieval Armenian Christian culture. The group includes St. Mesrob Mashtots, the creator of the Armenian alphabet, whose tomb rests under the altar of the church in Oshakan. On that day, parties of writers, translators, students, and school children—all of whom see the Holy Translators as their patron saints—visit Oshakan. Thus, the Shuhonts Gospels' presence is one element of a larger feast, which is both about religious rituals and celebrating Armenian literary tradition.

An essential feature of all five feasts is the books' symbolic return home or reunion with communities that previously took care of them. Before becoming a part of the Institute's collection, the Shuhonts Gospels stayed with a family living in Ashtarak, a town near Oshakan. The Powerful Gospels and the Gospel Book that leaves Matenadaran on

84. Armenian Church, "Gospel of Sangibaran."

the feast of St. Sarkis are returning for one day per year to the churches to which they once belonged. The former stayed in the Holy Mother of God church from the early eighteenth to the early twentieth century. The fame of the book was so great that the shrine itself received the name of Powerful: a tradition that persists to this day.⁸⁵ In turn, the idea of bringing the Gospel Book to St. Sarkis church came from a priest of this church, who also works as a researcher in the Matenadaran. As he told me, he found out that the Institute owns three manuscripts related to St. Sarkis church. He selected the best looking one and made it “return to its birthplace.”⁸⁶ There are no records attesting to this book’s miraculous powers in its rather uneventful biography. Nevertheless, today hundreds of people approach and venerate the manuscript during the feast.

The pilgrimage to the Shurishkan Gospels is the central event for Armenians from Shurishkan and other villages who left Iran to settle in Armenia in the 1960–1970s. The feast serves as an occasion for their annual gathering, when rarely seen relatives or friends meet and communal bonds are recreated. Waiting for their turn to venerate the manuscript, people chat in the yard of the church, sit around with picnic food, or stroll in between vendor stalls, as they would do on days of traditional village pilgrimage to local shrines.⁸⁷ Similarly, if on a smaller scale, the Sangibaran Gospels attracts to the church of St. Shoghakat Armenians whose family roots stretch to the village of Sangibaran in Iran.

As these short vignettes show, the feasts in which Gospel Books from the Matenadaran participate are occasions for religious pilgrimage when the faithful seek access to divine power. In turn, the pilgrims’ presence and acts of veneration allow the books to resume their religious functions. The feasts also bear the mark of the heritagization of these books, as they are released from the Institute to return to places or communities to which they once belonged. The words of a woman who initiated bringing the Shuhonts Gospels to Oshakan offer a good summary of the Gospel Books’ presence at the feasts as sacred objects, on the one hand, and a local or communal heritage, on the other hand:

I wanted our people to know that there exists such a Gospel Book, which earlier was here. I went to the Matenadaran, saw the Shuhonts Gospels, and decided together with our bishop that each year we will take it from the museum to the feast. [. . .] Now everybody wants to touch and kiss it. [. . .] It is a sacred book, so let people kiss it, let the book stay alive . . . ⁸⁸

85. Harutyunyan and Simonyan, *Zoravor*.

86. Conversation with a priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church, Yerevan, November 2018.

87. For more on such pilgrimages in Armenia, see Levon Abrahamian, Zaruhi Hambardzumyan, Gayane Shagoyan, and Gohar Stepanyan, “The Chain of Seven Pilgrimages in Kotaik, Armenia: Between Folk and Official Christianity,” in *Sacred Places, Emerging Spaces: Religious Pluralism in the Post-Soviet Caucasus*, ed. Tsypylma Darieva, Florian Mühlfried, Kevin Tuite (New York: Berghahn, 2018), 70–96.

88. Conversation in Yerevan, June 2014.

CONCLUSION

Inspired by Richard Davis's observation that "some objects experience lives of travel and change, disruption and transformation, influence and celebrity, and it is the lives of such mutable objects that make for the most interesting biographies,"⁸⁹ in this article I have discussed the social life of several Armenian Christian Gospel Books in the Mesrop Mashtots Institute of Ancient Manuscripts. In this state repository, research center, and museum, they have become precious pieces of tangible national heritage to be protected, renovated, studied, and displayed as objects that exemplify a unique Armenian artistic and literary tradition. The process of their museification and heritagization initially took shape in the context of Soviet Armenia's "apricot socialism," which was strongly colored with national history and culture but largely bereft of religious elements.⁹⁰ In the post-Soviet period, many secular principles remained in force in the Matenadaran, but several Gospel Books reclaimed their religious significance.

By addressing these issues, I join these scholars who call for a turn to "*what is happening in museums* instead of *what is inside a museum*."⁹¹ More precisely, my work contributes to the recently expanding field of research on religious objects in museums.⁹² From a corner of Christianity and the museum world which is rarely visited by scholars, it offers new insights on how such objects live their "social life"⁹³ and what policies of restrictions to and acknowledgement of this life are adopted by those responsible for their preservation and display. As Chip Colwell advocates, such a close look at "the trajectories of things taken, returned, and still held by museums" allows a deeper understanding of "how sacred objects in museums continue to have power and salience."⁹⁴

On the one hand, the Matenadaran has never returned any objects that entered its collection as a result of forced appropriation in communist times. In its exhibition halls, it does little to address the religious significance of Gospel Books. Rather, it endorses a "no touching, no spitting, no praying"⁹⁵ mode of visitor engagement. Contrary to some other museums with religious objects,⁹⁶ there are no public religious rituals taking place at the Institute, and no religious specialists or practitioners are

89. Richard H. Davis, "What Do Indian Images Really Want? A Biographical Approach," in *Sacred*, ed. Sullivan, 11.

90. Lehmann, "Apricot."

91. Cornejo González, "Museum," 79.

92. Adinolfi and van den Port, "Bed"; Brulon Soares, "Every Museum"; Buggeln, Paine, and Plate, eds., *Religion in Museums*; Cornejo González, "Museum"; Mairesse, "The Sacred"; Crispin Paine, "Introduction: Museums and Material Religion," *Material Religion* 8, no. 1 (2012): 4–8; Paine, *Religious*; Sullivan, *Sacred*; Wangefelt Ström, "How Do Museums."

93. Appadurai, *The Social*.

94. Colwell, "The Sacred," 10.

95. Saloni Mathur and Kavita Singh, eds., *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: The Museum in South Asia* (New Delhi and Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

96. Paine, *Religious*, 37–44; Sullivan, "Reconsecrating."

invited to share responsibility for the social life of these books. Hence, the Matenadaran does not perform one of the essential tasks that museums presenting religious collections are assumed to have, namely “to help visitors understand how the object was [used and] understood in its religious context.”⁹⁷

On the other hand, along with being objects of scientific research, educational display, and aesthetic admiration, some Gospel Books perform their religious duties inside the Institute, outside its walls, or both. There are—as in other museums—visitors who carry on their “devotional baggage”⁹⁸ to the Matenadaran and approach the Shurishkan Gospels and other manuscripts as sacred objects. But this is not the end of the story. Several books temporarily leave the Institute to participate in the feasts of the Armenian Church. Furthermore, within the Institute, some employees pray in front of them, communicate with them in dreams, and receive their supernatural support. The discussion of these two phenomena—temporary return to the religious milieu and museum staff’s religious engagement with objects they restore, protect, and study—takes the present work beyond the scope of most other similar studies.⁹⁹

These studies are usually embedded in colonial and postcolonial contexts, in which a dominant group (Western conquerors and colonizers) appropriated sacred objects from subjugated and culturally different peoples and radically recontextualized them in their collections and museums. Then, in the process of—partial and contested—acknowledgment of the cultural rights of historically oppressed peoples, a second recontextualization accompanied by “symbolic restitution”¹⁰⁰ and hesitant repatriation has started.¹⁰¹ In contrast, in the case described here, these hierarchical power relations and different regimes of value are blurred by the fact that both secularization-cum-heritagization of Gospel Books by the Matenadaran and their enchantment as akin to living beings by believers have been taking place within one and the same Soviet and post-Soviet Armenian culture.

This observation leads to the last main contribution of this work. Namely, it adds to the understanding of particular configurations of the sacred that are characteristic of Armenia and, in many respects, of post-Soviet time-space in general. As several scholars have pointed out, there exists a strong link between religious identity and national heritage in the former USSR, as exemplified by Orthodox pilgrims’ “longing for authenticity”¹⁰² or strategies of legitimization used by “national Churches” (e.g.,

97. Paine, *Religious*, 11.

98. Berns, “Devotional.”

99. Such as Buggeln, Paine, and Plate, *Religion*; Paine, *Religious*; Sullivan, *Sacred*.

100. Ruth Phillips, “Community Collaboration in Exhibitions: Introduction,” in *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, ed. Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 158.

101. Colwell, “The Sacred”; Peers, Gustafsson Reinius, and Shannon, “Introduction”; Helen A. Robins and Leigh Kuwanwisiwma, “Hopi Renewal and (Ritualized) Performance under American Law,” *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 5 (2017): 60–73.

102. Jeanne Kormina, “Avtobusniki: Russian Orthodox Pilgrims’ Longing for Authenticity,” in *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, ed. Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 267–88.

Armenian Apostolic and Russian Orthodox) “in search of relevance”¹⁰³ and against other religious groups.¹⁰⁴ In the case of Gospel Books in the Matenadaran, the Soviet-inherited discourse of national secular heritage that suppressed their religious significance still governs many agendas and policies of the Institute. However, the recently established feasts the Gospel Books participate in challenge such a position. Together with the veneration that some manuscripts receive in the Institute, these feasts show that religious sacralization of Gospel Books as miraculous objects and their secular sacralization as national heritage do not have to be mutually exclusive. Instead, they reveal more complex interrelations that question clear-cut divisions between religious and secular spheres and that should be taken into account in research on Armenian or, for that matter, any other post-Soviet society.

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103. Hratch Tchilingirian, “In Search of Relevance: Church and Religion in Armenia since Independence,” in *Religion et politique dans le Caucase post-soviétique*, ed. Bayram Balci and Raoul Motika (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2007), 277–311.

104. Eileen Barker, “‘But Who’s Going to Win?’ National and Minority Religions in Post-Communist Society,” in *New Religious Phenomena in Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Irena Borowik and Grzegorz Babiński (Kraków: Nomos, 1997), 25–62; Konrad Siekierski, “Religious and National Identities in Post-Soviet Armenia,” in *Religions and Identities in Transition*, ed. Irena Borowik and Małgorzata Zawila (Kraków: Nomos 2010), 149–62.