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Interaction Between the Secular and the Religious: The Exhibition *Latvia's Century* at the National History Museum of Latvia *

ANITA STASULANE **

Interakce mezi sekulárním a náboženským: expozice *Lotyšské století*
v Národním historickém muzeu Lotyšska

Abstract: The paper focuses on the interaction between the secular and the religious in the exhibition *Latvia's Century*, dedicated to the centenary of the Republic of Latvia, with its narrative being developed by the National History Museum of Latvia. When analyzing the qualitative data obtained through collecting visual information, and undertaking face-to-face in-depth expert interviews and observations, the author explains how the curators have positioned religious objects chronologically in a specific social and political context by using storytelling as the exhibition's primary interpretative strategy. Compared to the previous period of activity (1945–1990), when the museum was an institution of Soviet ideology, the National History Museum of Latvia has currently developed a new paradigm for the evaluation and interpretation of religion and religious objects. Alongside ethnicity, politics and language, the curators have identified religion as the most important element in Latvia's formation process. Religion is interpreted as one of Latvia's constitutive elements in the exhibition, emphasizing that it was society's major cohesive force in the past, influencing the development of national identity and defining the territorial borders of the Republic of Latvia.

Keywords: religion; secularity; national identity; National History Museum of Latvia; national identity; religious objects; secularism

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Introduction

In pointing out the main secularization theses developed by sociologists on religion [cf. *Herbert 2003*], the first thing that tends to be mentioned is social differentiation. Respectively, secularism is understood as a consequence of the differentiation process in society, as a result of which, semi-autonomous social spheres (politics, law, economics, science, education, etc.) have developed. As a result, the influence of religion and its institutions has decreased, and it is increasingly being moved over to people's private sphere. Second, societalization is also mentioned: religious values and religious leaders are losing authority and influence with direct face-to-face social contact being replaced

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** Prof. Anita Stasulane, Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Daugavpils University, Daugavpils, Vienības iela 13, Daugavpils LV-5401, Latvia; Department of Sociology, Andragogy and Cultural Anthropology, Faculty of Arts, Palacký University Olomouc, tř. Svobody 8, Olomouc, Czech Republic. E-mail: anita.stasulane@du.lv

by the anonymous social contacts of urbanized society. Third, rationalization: along with the development of science, the world-view of people is changing, and religion, religious belief no longer functions as an instrument for the meaning of life. Finally, *worldliness* or the internal secularization of religions is put forward by sociologists as the fourth most popular thesis, i.e. religions are being alienated from questions of transcendence and are focusing increasingly actively on social and political problems.

These secularization theses, developed by sociologists on religion, can also apply to Latvia. Empirical data on church attendance in Latvia¹ confirms the secularization processes. Religious affiliation numbers are, however, rather high.² Drawing parallels with Ireland and Poland [cf. Norris – Inglehart 2004], it is also apparent in Latvia that the formation of national identity and religion has been intertwined historically. This is vividly reflected in an exhibition which was dedicated to Latvia's centenary at the National History Museum of Latvia.³

A secular state was created with the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia (1918), and in accordance with Article 99 of Latvia's Constitution *Satversme*, the church in Latvia is separate from the state. The Constitution of the Republic of Latvia (adopted in 1922) was developed in line with Europe's most modern and democratic constitutions, and secularization was an integral part of the ideology of the newly created Latvian state. Modernization theoreticians view the role of religion as one of the dividing borders distinguishing traditional and modern society. The cohesion of modern society is based on secular values (democracy, equality, etc.), and religion no longer provides cohesive values.

With the approach of the state's centenary, the National History Museum of Latvia developed the exhibition *Latvijas gadsimts* (Latvia's Century), which provides an overview of Latvia's "land, people and nation" [*National History Museum of Latvia 2018: 2*], respectively, providing an account of the formation of the Latvian state and national identity. In this paper, we will be examining how religion has embedded itself in the historical narrative of the founding of the Latvian state and its centenary, as the objects which have been provided by the curators in the exhibition to museum visitors, directly or indirectly, present the spectrum of relationships between secularism and religiousness [cf. Levitt 2015: 3].

Although the broadest goal of the research⁴ is to re-examine established ways of thinking about secularism, there is still a justified reason why this case study is suitable methodology for the subject of study. As a comprehensive research method, the case study

¹ From a survey conducted by the SKDS Research center in late 2000, 24% of those surveyed said that they attended church at Christmas, but in late 2018, only 18% of Latvian residents had given serious thought to the possibility of attending church on Christmas Eve [*LETA 2018*].

² Since the question regarding religion is not included in the population census any longer, information on religious demographics in Latvia is not available. The adherent statistics annually reported by the Latvian Ministry of Justice allows us to estimate about 1.5 million members of religious organizations in Latvia (population 1.93 million).

³ The National History Museum of Latvia holds a unique place among museums. It was established in 1869 as the Museum of the Science Committee of the Riga Latvian Society. Its mission is "to collect, preserve, research and popularize the spiritual and material culture from Latvia and the world from ancient times until today, which has archaeological, ethnographic, numismatic, historical or artistic significance, in the interests of the Latvian nation and its people" [*National History Museum of Latvia*].

⁴ The paper came about within the framework of the "Atheism, Freethought and Secularization in Central and Eastern European Countries in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries" Project (Agreement No. 18-11345S).

focuses on an occurrence within a specific social and cultural context and includes various qualitative techniques. While data collection involved a different combination of methodological tools, an ethnographic means of capturing data was basically utilized, including: participating in the setting and direct observation, in-depth interviews and analysis of the exhibits. The observation entailed the systematic notation and recording of objects in the museum (1,343 photographic images were collected). Semi-structured face-to-face in-depth expert interviews were conducted. Data on the background (leaflets, flyers, posters, the website of the museum, etc.) and the historical context (object labels, etc.) was also gathered.

Curatorial Strategy

The *Latvia's Century* exhibition differs significantly from the National History Museum of Latvia's permanent exhibition,⁵ and, as explained by the curator, this has its reasons: 1) the chronological boundaries: the Latvian centenary defined the period to be reflected, i.e. the period of Latvia's history (1918–2018), which is connected with statehood; 2) the form of the exposition: as *Latvia's Century* is a three year product (May 2018 – May 2021) and the creators of the exhibition did not have to consider the functionality or the sustainability of the materials used.

The paradigm of the permanent exhibition is markedly didactic, as it is matched to education standards and teaching programs. As the National History Museum of Latvia is actively attended by large groups of students, the terminology and chronology used in schoolbooks is retained in the permanent exhibition. It could be said that the permanent exhibition provides viewpoints and morals appropriate to the school program, with no surprises: "In the core exhibition, the story is analogous to a story in a classic history textbook: one period replaces another period of Latvian history and the main characteristics which are associated with the structure of society, etc., in each period are highlighted" [Stasulane 2018]. Problem issues, for example, which have been addressed in the *person-society-nation* aspect, have been placed at the forefront of the *Latvia's Century* exhibition. As explained by the curator, "the great historical narrative and major concepts (war, totalitarianism, etc.) are mentioned, but have been placed in a secondary position, taking into account more people's personal feelings in each period of time" [Stasulane 2018].

The exhibition team of eleven curators was aware that "visitors seek museum experiences that tell a human story and help them make a personal connection" [Blond – Chandler – Werb 2017: 22] and chose to discuss how people felt in a particular period of history, and how people's destinies were influenced in particular historical periods. With this goal, four or five different life stories were included in each section of the exhibition:⁶

⁵ The National History Museum of Latvia's permanent space is in Rīga Castle. After a fire which broke out in the castle (2013) during the period of the reconstruction work, the museum found a home in the former rooms of the University of Latvia's Faculty of History and Philosophy. The currently accessible permanent exhibition is, in reality, a temporary exhibition, which will be changed as soon as the museum returns to its permanent home at Rīga Castle.

⁶ The exhibition is made up of 11 sections: Introduction: Land. People. Nation. 2. Road to the Latvian State. World War I (1914–1918). 3. Defending Latvia's Statehood. War of Independence (1918–1920). 4. Latvia in the Making. Democratic Republic (1920–1934). 5. Latvian Latvia. Kārlis Ulmanis' Authoritarian Regime (1934–1940). 6. The Suppressed State. World War II (1940–1945). 7. Attempted Destruction of Latvia.

They are contemporaries who differ according to their social origins, activity, etc. We have tried to introduce an individual perspective. Another thing was to introduce the family experience, to encourage and stir up that which a person could recognize in the exhibition, respectively, things, little items, memorabilia, or souvenirs or the general legacy of items which have remained from each period. There is a sideboard from the so-called time of peace – from the 1920s–1930s where people recognize: “Yes, my grandmother also had that little book, or those sorts of figurines or porcelain cups.” Folksy souvenirs from the Ulmanis period,⁷ eg., a five-lat coin with the profile of a folk maiden, which everybody recognizes. Things which were associated with the needy period of post-war life as well, when a lot of things were utilized a second time: altered and remade. A Soviet wall-unit, which allows visitors from Latvia (not foreign visitors) to sense: “My experience or that of my family has a connection with this great historical narrative here.” [Stasulane 2018]

Although formal post-visit surveys were not conducted, a member of the museum staff has observed that visitors were having personally meaningful emotional experiences. The fixation on a human-centered story certainly omitted opportunities to deliver a certain content. In this way, by using storytelling as the primary interpretative strategy of the *Latvia's Century* exhibition, the curators positioned objects in a specific social, political and temporal context.

Museum critics and historians have observed that museums have been focusing less and less on objects in recent decades: “The dominance of themes and stories, rather than collections, can mean a more limited engagement with artifacts” [Burd Shiavo 2013: 48]. The *Latvia's Century* exhibition is also advanced by stories, themes and ideas, not items. The objects⁸ exhibited are, however, carriers of meaning and not just illustrations of stories, themes and ideas, as the exhibition is personalized through people's biographical stories. In this way, the exhibition is consistent with the motto for Latvia's centenary *Es esmu Latvija* (I am Latvia), as it activates the visitor's family's historical experience and belonging to Latvia. In other words, the exhibition's concept is based on the issue of national identity.

A religious tack has not been clearly cultivated in the exhibition's concept, although religious items and objects, which encompass religious aspects, can be found among the exhibits. One should take into account that about half of the eleven exhibition curators are from the younger generation and began their professional activity after the renewal of Latvia's independence, having a different view on the interaction of the religious and the secular. It was specifically the younger generation of curators who pointed out that the exhibition's creators were aware that “the church and school are two things which turned out not to have been sufficiently represented” [Stasulane 2018], and also expressed some regret that no clergyman's life story had been included. In his evaluation, “this does not correspond with historical reality, as in both the inter-war period, as well as in the Soviet period, religious life had a sufficiently large role in passing on traditions” [Stasulane 2018]. Compared with the previous period of activity (1945–1990), when the museum⁹ was an

Stalinism (1945–1953). 8. Latvia as a Personal Space. Under the Soviet System (1953–1986). 9. The Desire for Statehood. Restoration of Latvian Independence (1986–1991). 10. Challenges of Democracy. Creating Modern Latvia (1991–2004). 11. Contemporary Latvia.

⁷ Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942), the head of an authoritarian regime (1934–1940).

⁸ The driving force of the exhibition is the 1,500 unique items, photographs, audio recordings, films and video stories.

⁹ During the period of the Soviet occupation, the name of the museum changed three times: the Latvian SSR Central State History Museum (1944), the Latvian SSR History Museum (1956) and the History Museum of

institution of Soviet ideology, the National History Museum of Latvia is currently creating a new paradigm for the evaluation and interpretation of religion and religious objects.

Interpretation of Religion

In the Latvian context, the exhibition dedicated to the nation's centenary reflects an attempt to re-evaluate relationships between the religious and the secular, even though the "fundamental categories of Western museum practice constitute pervasive relics of secularization theory and its precedent enlightenment constructions" [*Promey 2017: XX*] and even now, there has not been an evaluation of how secularization theory has influenced forms and how the world of objects which museums present, represent and exhibit is structured. The aim of the curators of the exhibition has certainly not been to answer the question of what religion is. The answer to the question of what the role of religion has been in the development process of the Latvian state and national identity, however, can be clearly discerned.

The introductory section, *Land, People, Nation* commences with digital projections offered to visitors, which mark how the social, political and cultural space which we call Latvia has developed. One can select from one of four themes: ethnic groups, religions, a political map and the language of administration. By pressing a button on the chosen topic, one can follow what the cartographic landscape, which characterized the ethnic groups living in Latvian territory, the political powers, the language used and the practiced religion, was in different centuries. Alongside ethnicity, politics and language, the exhibition's curators have consequently identified religion as the most important element in Latvia's formation process: "A map of religions – it was our conviction that without the Christian Church and the borders of Christian denominations, it is difficult to understand the creation of the Latvian cultural space where the Latvian state was later founded" [*Stasulane 2018*].

The maps of religions chronologically commence in 1500 and reflect the borders of Christian denominations in the Baltic territory: the border between the two branches of Christianity is in eastern Latvia, i.e. *Western Christianity* (the Roman Catholic Church) and *Eastern Christianity* (the Orthodox Church). The next map of religions with the date 1600, marks the Protestant territories in the Baltic, and encompasses the response to several important historical questions, for example "why was the different nature of the Baltics, Latvia and Estonia, their distinctiveness against the Russian Empire¹⁰ a fairly natural idea, and why did there have to be a special discussion with Latgale in 1917,¹¹ – this was determined by the political and denominational past" [*Stasulane 2018*].

In making observations about how the guides at the National History Museum of Latvia begin excursions, it was noticed that, firstly, a paradox is emphasized: looking at digital maps, one can establish that even in the period when the Latvian state had not yet come into existence, one could still perceive the contours of Latvia's current state borders. Concerning the question of the types of factors which determined the creation of these

Latvia (1989).

¹⁰ The western and central part of Latvia was included within the Russian Empire as the Courland Governorate and the Livonian Governorate.

¹¹ The eastern part of Latvia was included within the Vitebsk Governorate (currently Byelorussia).

contours, the guides point to ethnicity, religion and language, emphasizing that Latvia's contours have been relatively stable since the Livonian period (thirteenth-sixteenth centuries). In describing the religious landscape in Latvian territory in the early sixteenth and seventeenth centuries cartographically, a line dividing the denominational division is marked in the exhibition, demonstratively revealing that the current cultural space in the territory of Latvia has existed for centuries and that it has been different from the surrounding territories. The exhibition allows one to understand that religion was society's major cohesive force in the past. In this way, religion is interpreted as one of the Latvian state's constitutive elements, determining the creation of the newly established Latvian Republic's territorial borders (1918–1920).¹²

Interpreting Religious Objects

It is indisputable that “all the objects in the museums bear the mark of curatorial intention, all are ‘interpreted’ in one way or another by museum staff, even if simply by choosing to put a particular object in a display case or tell a particular story about it” [*Buggeln – Paine – Plate 2017: 5*]. In the *Latvia's Century* exhibition, religious objects are included, but not with the goal of revealing the sacred function of the items. Instead, they are interpreted as cultural and historical evidence.

In the context of the current Baltic and its borderland geopolitical situation, it might be expected that Latvia's centenary exhibition's message would commence with a retrospective look at traditional Latvian culture and religion, including the story of the Christianization of the Baltic tribes,¹³ which determined the Baltics' inclusion within the Western European social-political space. It was surprising that the reference to Latvian traditional culture, where a reconstruction of a Latgalian woman's costume based on archaeological finds from the eleventh-twelfth centuries in Lazdiņi, Taurene township, has been placed in the first display cases in a secondary position.¹⁴ Georgius Mancelius' (1593–1654) collection of homilies *Langgewünschte Lettische Postill* (The Long-Awaited Latvian Sermon Book) [*Mancelis 1699*] has been, in contrast placed up front. The first edition of this book came out in 1654.

Visitors who look at the book without reading the *exhibition labels* usually are under the impression that it is a Bible,¹⁵ but the curators have specifically selected Mancelius' book of homilies because it contains the first texts written, rather than translated, in the Latvian language. Mancelius'¹⁶ book of homilies was truly *long-awaited*, as he worked on it for about 20 years [cf. *Hausmanis – Nollendorfs – Tabüns – Vecgrāvis 1998*]. There is no

¹² As opposed to Estonia, which already declared its independence on 24 February 1918, the Republic of Latvia was only proclaimed after the end of the war on 18 November 1918, but armed battles for the existence of the Republic of Latvia continued until 1920.

¹³ In Latvia, Christianity gained converts through the work of missionaries from Germany such as St. Meinhard (b. 1196) who established himself in Ikšķile where he built a church. In 1186, the Archbishop of Bremen consecrated him first bishop of Ikšķile [cf. *Kathleen 2000: 283*].

¹⁴ The remainder of the costumes displayed in the first two display cases are from later centuries.

¹⁵ The New Testament in the Latvian language was published in 1685, and the entire Bible in 1694, i.e. forty years later. Mancelius' book of homilies was the main means for Latvians to develop reading skills even before the Bible.

¹⁶ Georg Mancelius (1593–1654) was one of the most educated Lutheran pastors in Latvia. He served in Latvian congregations in his youth (1616–1625). Alongside essays on theology and the natural sciences in the Latin

discussion in the context of the exhibition about the importance this book may have had in encouraging piety and devout fulfillment of religious obligations. The emphasis is on the fact that this book of homilies encouraged the reading skills of four generations, and was such popular reading matter that it was published five times.¹⁷ This text of a religious character is consequently looked at in its cultural historical aspect and interpreted in a broad secular context.

Sebastian Münster's (1488–1552) encyclopaedia *Cosmographie* (Cosmography) is placed behind this book of homilies. In it, one of the first¹⁸ published texts in the Latvian language, the Lord's Prayer, can be read.¹⁹ Already in the sixteenth century, this religious text was not published with a religious purpose, but with the aim of illustrating the language, which was spoken in one of the territories next to the Baltic Sea. In the exhibition context, this text tells us of the passing on of language. From field research at the museum, it was observed that the guides quite widely discussed the topic of the first texts written in the Latvian language, which were religious texts. An audio recording of the Lord's Prayer written in the sixteenth century can be heard at the museum read out by an actor. As explained by the curator, "the second message is that we can understand this sixteenth century text, if only we can technically read it. Our language is ancient, and even after a period of 500 years, we can still understand this language" [Stasulane 2018].

Another exhibit of a religious character is the chronicle from the Unity of the Brethren²⁰ Congregation's Daudži meeting house (1769–1825). The guides do not go deep into the character of the chronicle,²¹ but explain this religious movement's role in the development of Latvian national consciousness. Through an inspection of a map of places where nineteenth century authors were born, the unmistakably dominant nature of the central part of Latvia (*Vidzeme*) is revealed. This has its reasons – the *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of the Brethren) movement, in Latvian – *Brāļu draudze* or *hernhūtisms* began to flourish in Vidzeme.²² This had a significant role, not only in strengthening Latvian religiousness, but also in the development of national self-confidence and education. The Unity of the Brethren allocated a large role to individual religious experience, emphasizing the reading of the Bible, the rewriting of religious texts and the singing of religious songs. It can be confirmed that the story about the Unity of the Brethren had to be included in the exhibition, as many long-term phenomena of Latvian culture are connected with it, eg., choir culture, which

and German languages, he systematized the orthography of the Latvian language and published a book of homilies in the Latvian language.

¹⁷ The last edition of Georg Mancelius' collection of homilies came out in 1823.

¹⁸ The first published text of the Lord's Prayer is already included in Münster's *Cosmographie* which was published in 1550. The publication in the exhibition came out in 1592.

¹⁹ Up until the Reformation, the main writers of texts in the Latvian language were monks of various orders of the Roman Catholic Church. Due to the violent nature of the Reformation and the Livonian War (sixteenth century), the oldest texts in the Latvian language have not been preserved. In Sweden, the library at Upsala University has the Roman Catholic Church's *Agenda* (1507), which was used by Livonian clergy. The book also contains a hand-written Lord's Prayer in the Latvian Language.

²⁰ The year 1736 can be considered a time when the Unity of the Brethren commenced their activities in Latvia. Count Nikolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, who had triumphal achievements with his sermons, arrived here at that time from Saxony. The following year, preachers from the Unity of the Brethren began to learn the Latvian language and launched their activities at schools in Vidzeme.

²¹ The chronicle is a peasant-written text about the construction of the Brethren congregation's building. Historically, this was the first religious building constructed at the initiative of the Latvians themselves.

²² The latest and broadest research on the history of the Unity of the Brethren in Latvia [cf. *Ceipe* 2010].

we will discuss later and even the use of diacritical symbols (č, š, ž) in Latvian orthography [Štolls 2009: 37]. The direct influence of the *Unitas Fratrum* could still be observed, in contrast, in the early twentieth century in Latvian literature [Grudule 2007: 5].

Another exhibit of a religious nature has been selected with a similar purpose – a handwritten Catholic Prayer Book (late nineteenth century), which is also an item of broad interpretation. In the eighteenth century, all of the current territory of Latvia was conquered by Russia. In 1772, Eastern Latvia (*Latgale*) with its Roman Catholic population was also incorporated into the Russian Empire and continued to be separate from the rest of Latvia administratively.²³ In suppressing the Polish uprising (1863), the Tsarist administration forbade the publication and distribution of any kinds of texts with a Latin script or Antiqua, which was the method of writing used in Latgale.²⁴ The so-called ban on printing (1865–1904) significantly delayed the development of culture and education in Eastern Latvia. An entire generation was subject to powerful Russification: there was an attempt to introduce primers and calendars printed in the Latvian language with the Russian alphabet or Cyrillic script in Latgale. The people refused to purchase or read these books. During the years of the printing ban, Latvian books were published in the Latin alphabet illegally using the strategy of counterfeit (deliberately misleading publication data), and local Jews were smuggling these books printed from Prussia. The demand for Latvian books, especially those intended for religious practice, was extremely high. As the old prayer books became worn, people began to repair the books, replacing torn pages and sticking in new ones, which they had written themselves in printed letters. In this way a new mode of “publishing” was developed: copying by hand. Mostly peasants in Latgale without a school education, rewrote Latgalian prayer books by hand, wrote practical suggestions for farmers, folklore texts and also original compositions. In this way, prayer books in the native language, written by hand, became a measure of non-violent political opposition and an instrument for maintaining Latvian identity in the conditions of forced Russification.

The first four life stories, which provide an understanding of the political structures which had existed in the territory of Latvia, and the geo-political interests of the Baltic Germans, Russians and Poles and the Latvians themselves, are included in the *Land, People, Nation* introductory section. In discussing the interaction between the religious and the secular, the life story of Gustaw von Manteuffel (1832–1916) is significant, and the *Terra Mariana 1186–1888* album is also worthy of note.

The album reflects the history of Latvia and Estonia, formerly Livonia, also known as the Land of Mary – *Terra Mariana*. It should be explained that in the first half of the thirteenth century, the territory of Latvia and Estonia was owned by the Roman Catholic Church and was given a specific title: *Terra Mariana*. The reference to Livonia as the Land of Mary can be found in the oldest written source available at present of Baltic history *Heinrici Chronicon*. It mentions that in 1215, Albert the Bishop of Riga asked the Pope in Rome to protect *Terra Matris* (the Land of Mother) in a similar way as *Terra Filii* (the Land

²³ Latgale was administratively divided off from the rest of Latvia already in the early seventeenth century, when it ended up as part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth as the Inflanty Province. The aristocracy became Polonized and kept the Catholic faith which retained its position among the local peasantry as well, due mainly to the efforts of the Jesuits and the Dominicans. When Eastern Latvia ended up in the Russian Empire, it was included in Vitebsk Governorate.

²⁴ Gothic script was used in the rest of Latvia.

of the Son) in Palestine [Heinrici 1993: 208] was being protected. The title *Terra Mariana*²⁵ was officially bestowed on Livonia by Pope Innocent III (1245).

The *Terra Mariana 1186–1888*²⁶ album was originally made in one single copy and presented as a gift to Pope Leo XIII (1888). Gustaw von Manteuffel, a nobleman from Latgale and a keen historian of the region, was the author of this *project*. The curator explained that *the concept* Terra Mariana “had dissolved over the course of history along with the collapse of Livonia and the Reformation. Those who first wrote the history of the Baltics, the Baltic Germans, did not identify with *Terra Mariana*, and were in opposition to Manteuffel” [Stasulane 2018]. Manteuffel tried to demonstrate Latgale’s peculiarity, emphasizing its Catholicism, representing Polish interests to a degree in this way, but was not understood by Poland’s Poles.

It is significant that cultural references and allusions to *Terra Mariana* or St. Mary can also be noticed in exhibits in other sections of the exhibition. The *Land, People, Nation* introductory section concludes with the digitally projected flags of Latvian societies from the late nineteenth century, of which one is particularly interesting. This is the flag of the Jelgava Latvian Society which was established in 1880. The usual explanation is that in the center of the flag is “Athena, the Ancient Greek goddess of wisdom, science and art, with a lyre in her hands, from which sounds flow like gilded stars (14), which wind around the head of the goddess” [Jelgavas]. It should be admitted, however, that this image is more similar to a reproduction of the Virgin Mary than Athena. Iconographic modifications have taken place: the image of the Child Jesus has been replaced by the lyre and there are 14, and not 12 stars, around her head, but the overall composition of the image of the Mother of God has been preserved.²⁷

The image described above leads to some reflection about two phenomena which are quite characteristic of various periods and cultures: about the symbiosis of various religious symbols as well as the actualization of the feminine archetype. In the Latvian context, the symbiosis of various religious symbols has taken place in a secular environment (the Jelgava Latvian Society flag is a secular attribute of a secular organization). In a similar way, an updating of the feminine archetype has also taken place in a secular environment. The exhibition offers an encounter with images of *goddesses* and feminine religious symbols included in the Latvian historical tradition.

The female, as a symbol of Latvia, is included several times in the exhibits placed in the exhibition. Two postcards have been placed in the second section²⁸ of the exhibition: *God, Bless Latvia* (1916, designer Jānis Roberts Tillbergs) and *The Fatherland Is Experiencing*

²⁵ The interpretation of *Terra Mariana* at present also encompasses esoteric aspects: astrologists maintain that the area of the Baltic nations is located under the sign of the Virgin and dictates the Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian mentality and ethnic characteristics [cf. *Skutāns*].

²⁶ The album contains a wealth of visual and textual material on Livonian castles, castle ruins, churches, coats of arms of the noble families, seals, information and illustrations of important historical figures, and prints of ancient silver and gold coins. The original copy is kept in the Vatican Apostolic Library. In the early twentieth century, the content of the *Terra Mariana* album (particularly the water colours) gained the attention of art lovers, which is why the idea of printing more copies of this publication came about. In 1903, the *Terra Mariana* publication (four times smaller in size than the original), which is exhibited in the exhibition, was prepared using a special printing method.

²⁷ In Christian iconography, the image of the Mother of God is created according to the Book of Revelation (Ch.12).

²⁸ *Road to the Latvian State. World War I (1914–1918)*.

Difficult Times. Sons, Rush to Help (1916, designer Rihards Zariņš). The female was reproduced on the first Latvian currency. The Republic of Latvia's five rouble treasury note (1919, designer Ansis Cīrulis) can be seen at the exhibition. The image of the female is repeated infrequently in photographs of memorials included in the interactive application *Memorials of the Latvian War of Independence*. The memorial, for example, to the members of the Džūkste Congregation and the Liberation of Dobeles monument, etc. The exhibition recalls other significant monuments in the minds of visitors: the Latgale liberation monument *Vienoti Latvijai* (United for Latvia), known as *Latgale's Māra*, which has a young woman in a traditional Latvian costume with a cross held high in her right hand.²⁹ Several symbolic levels flow together in this image: the mythical, the religious and the secular.

A similar phenomenon can be noticed in other objects included in the exhibition. A worker and farmer are portrayed, for example, in the Ventspils Workers' Association Membership Card, between which there is an image of a female standing in Latvian traditional costume with a lowered sword in one hand and a Latvian flag in the other. In the diploma of Latvia's highest military award, the Order of Lāčplēsis³⁰ (1920–1940), a female in Latvian traditional costume can be seen placing a wreath of oak leaves on the head of a soldier.³¹ Among the political placards digitally projected at the exhibition, one cannot help but notice the Women's National League placard from the 1937 Latvian parliament elections, in which a female is once again portrayed in Latvian traditional costume with an invitingly raised right hand and the Latvian flag in her left hand. A similar political placard was also created in 1931 prior to the Riga City Council elections. At the center of the Middle-Class Association list's campaign placard is a female in Latvian traditional costume who has joined hands with a soldier and a farmer.

It may, perhaps, be an overstatement, but one would like to add that the image of the *goddess* has also come into popular culture in a desacralized way: four different period dolls in Latvian traditional costume are exhibited together: a doll created in the 1930s, a Soviet period industrially manufactured doll, a Barbie doll from the exile period dressed in a folk costume and a rag doll in folk costume from 2013. With respect to the Soviet period doll, the exhibition label explains that, since the 1960s, the industrially produced doll Baiba³² has been not only a popular souvenir symbolizing the friendship of the Soviet republics, but also an icon of local patriotism and Latvian national identity. From the author's personal experience from the Soviet era, it should be added that the Baiba doll was a fairly expensive product which could not be easily obtained and was not given to children to play with. With respect to the doll from the exile period, the exhibition description explains that in the 1970s, two Latvians living in Sweden, began making miniature, ethnographically precise, models of Latvian folk costumes for Barbie and Ken dolls. They made over 200 replicas in all of folk costumes. It is thought that these dolls, like the Soviet

²⁹ The monument, which was dedicated to the liberation of Latgale from the Bolsheviks, was erected in 1939 in Rēzekne (sculptor K. Jansons, design by L. Tomašickis). It was destroyed twice (1940 and 1950) and reconstructed twice (1943 and 1992).

³⁰ The mythological hero Lāčplēsis ('bear-slayer'). For details see, Šmidchens, 2007.

³¹ One of the diplomas exhibited at the exhibition was issued in 1920 to Teofans Radionovs. It was damaged in June 1941 during an NKVD search of Radionovs' home. The second, a well preserved diploma, was issued in 1921 to Jānis Liepiņš.

³² Doll Baiba, in Bārta folk costume. Made for the 50th anniversary of Communist Subbotnik (volunteer weekend work), 17 April 1969. Factory *Straume*.

Baiba, were not given to children to play with. They were highly respected and had a special *salvific* quality.

In reviewing the presence of religious items in the exhibition from a thematic aspect, one immediately notices that most of the religious items have been placed specifically in the *Land. People. Nation* introductory section, where an answer to the questions of what is a Latvian and what is Latvia, is being sought. In this section, the exhibited religious items or items of a religious character, in terms of form, are mainly texts: Mancelius' collection of homilies, the chronicle of the Unity of the Brethren Congregation's Daudži meeting house, the handwritten Catholic Prayer Book and the album *Terra Mariana 1186–1888*. One might imagine that a certain contradiction is expressed here, as currently only 11% of Latvians see religion as a key component of national identity [*Pew Research Center 2018*]. In reality, these religious items which have been exhibited, or items of a religious nature, are not about religion as such, as the exhibition's curators have bonded the issue of national identity first with language, the development of its orthography and the development of the publication of books. It was through the use of language and writing that the ideas of 'us', i.e. the Latvians, and 'others', i.e. the non-Latvians, were constructed. This was determined historically as the Latvians were subject to the dominance of a foreign language for a long time: right up to 1918, the German, Swedish, Polish and Russian languages were used at different times in the territory of Latvia as the language of administration. In the mid-nineteenth century, a strong trend developed, maintaining that a Latvian was not merely a peasant, and that Latvians could also be educated people, and as explained in the exhibition, Latvian students in the 1850s developed the idea of Latvia as a cultural and social space shaped by Latvians. The name *Latvia* first appeared in the press in the 1830s. It gained more frequent use in the 1850s when it was popularized by the first Latvian intellectuals.

Ritual in the Museum and the Museum as Ritual

The main focus in the *Attempted Destruction of Latvia: Stalinism (1945–1953)* section is dedicated to the Sovietization of rural areas, i.e. to the theme of collective farming (*kolkhozes*) as initially,

70% of Latvian people lived in rural areas, the absolute majority of residents after the Second World War. This proportion changed afterwards. The second reason is that there was this turning against the idea of the private farmstead, which had been very important for Latvians since the New Latvians³³ period and also in the early twentieth century. This is an ideal ("one's nook, one's little parcel of land") that people strived for over many years. Then suddenly after the war, an external directive declared that "no, your traditional experience is of no use to anyone. Kolkhozes must be developed". The scheme was similar: your lifestyle is useless, socialist traditions must be developed, or your culture is of no value, you must praise the achievements of the workers. [*Stasulane 2018*]

³³ The New Latvians (in Latvian – *jaunlatvieši*) Movement laid the groundwork for the First National Awakening from the 1850s to the 1880s. Originally a derogatory epithet (*ein junges Lettland*) applied to the first Latvian intellectuals by their mostly Baltic German opponents, it became a term for a representatives of this primarily cultural and literary movement.

In the *Latvia as a Personal Space: Under the Soviet System (1953–1986)* section, the curator's intention was to reflect on how the Soviet administration tried to establish a new, correct living model in people: "We are demonstrating that the model of Soviet living was being constructed in the public space, starting from participation in mass organizations from childhood, Little Octobrists and Pioneers, from a cult of work achievement as a component of adult life" [Stasulane 2018]. Although the exhibition does not expand on the theme of the Sovietization of religious rituals, the page with photographs which is exhibited in the album, reflecting the so-called *socialist funeral*, is significant. This is not a family album, but instead the initiative of the small village of Naukšēni's Soviet Women's Council, to document how the Communist Party's instructions were being implemented. Religious celebrations and the secularization of ritual were part of the USSR's anti-religious policy [cf. Vīksne 2017: 52–79]. The Soviet administration tried to create traditions consistent with its ideology in a focused way, and that is why it established a special committee to monitor the introduction of Soviet traditions in 1964.³⁴ The plan was that a committee had to be formed in each territorial administrative unit, the task of which was to organize and coordinate Soviet traditional events. The album exhibited is striking evidence of the fact that attempts to secularize religious ritual were implemented during the Soviet period.

In the *Latvia as a Personal Space: Under the Soviet System (1953–1986)* section of the exhibition, photographs can be viewed of how the summer solstice was celebrated during the Soviet period. This once again brings us back to the question of the presentation of Latvian traditional religion at the exhibition. The longest-standing legacy of the ancient religion, which has been preserved in folk traditions but without religious content, is the celebration of *Jāņi*. These are some of the examples of how a peasant people's land fertility cult, a sun cult and phallic cult has been able to transform and survive through the centuries. Family photographs from the Soviet period show that Latvians continued to celebrate the summer solstice privately despite the prohibition on this celebration. The exhibition provides an opportunity to explain that in the view of the Soviet regime, this was a celebration for drinkers and nationalists, which they tried to prohibit. The official attitude of the Soviet administration towards the Latvians' greatest celebration changed several times. There were periods of prohibition and a time when the administration turned a blind eye to the celebrations and tried to transform *Jāņi* into a Soviet tradition, renaming it the *Līgo* celebration.³⁵ To wean the Latvians off *Jāņi*, they even changed the name of the traditional Latvian cheese (*Jāņi* cheese was renamed *Rural* cheese or *Caraway* cheese) and in place of the name *jāņogas* (red currants), they tried to introduce the Russified *sarkanās upenes* (in Russian: *krasnaya smorodina* – 'red black currants'). The campaign against *Jāņi* did have some success: in the 1970s, cardboard hats in the form of sombreros took the place of wreaths of oak leaves, but this stimulated discussion about the authenticity of the *Jāņi* tradition and the desire to preserve it.

Ritual is usually associated with religious practice: it is the *realm* of magic and belief, however, "our supposedly secular culture is full of ritual situations and events, very few

³⁴ In Latvia, this work was coordinated by the Ministry of Culture's Club Work Scientific Methodical Office, (later the E. Melngailis Folk Art Building), which developed recommendations for organizing various events in 1976. In 1979, this was transformed into the Latvian SSR Cabinet of Ministers' Soviet Tradition, Festivals, Rituals and Observation Facilitation Committee.

³⁵ The refrain in the *Jāņi* celebratory songs is "līgo, līgo, līgo".

of which take place in religious contexts. Like other societies, ours also builds sites that publicly represent beliefs about the order of the world, its past and present, and the individual's place within it" [Duncan 1995: 11]. Sequenced spaces and arrangements of objects form the ritual of the museum visit with a clearly defined structure: visitors enter the space and follow the path of the narrative, stopping at certain places and reflecting. In this way, the movement through the exhibition space is a ritual in its own way, during which the visitors create ideas about themselves and the groups to which they belong: looking at the exhibits representing the past, the visitor lingers in their thoughts on those *others*, who once owned these items in the past. There are always places where all visitors dwell for a while in a museum or exhibition. They are the most important elements of the narrative, which have been highlighted in particular. They take up a central part on the wall, are specially framed, placed in the center of the space or in a very visible spot. That fact that nobody can go past the culminating message is guaranteed.

As the *Latvia's Century* exhibition is dedicated to the centenary of the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia, the culmination of the narrative is located in a separate space, at the center of which is a photograph with the participants in the nation's proclamation. The special significance of this item, one could even say its *salvific quality*, is defined by the fact that it is the only photograph in which the historic moment of the declaration of the Republic of Latvia is documented.³⁶ The copy of the photograph has been exhibited as a large format digital projection, placed high above the display case which contains items which provide more detail about the event: the minutes of the People's Council's³⁷ founding meeting, the bell and inkpot used at the People's Council founding, the entry ticket to the proclamation event at the opera theater of that time, etc. Stands and display cases with the 38 persons who proclaimed the Republic of Latvia are located in a semi-circle around the display case. This special composition allows the visitor to understand that they are approaching something *sacred*.

Although the exhibition is set up chronologically, it has a specially divided off space, which leads the visitor beyond time. This is a space which is dedicated to the Song Celebration. The longevity of this tradition is highlighted in a compact way in one of the display cases, with the placement of items from various stages in Latvian history. This is the second *sacred* space in the exhibition, which describes the Song Celebration. It is based on the *a capella* singing tradition, but has, over time, developed into a multidisciplinary event, which encompasses various genres of art and means of expression.³⁸ The origins of the Song Celebration can be found in Germany in the early nineteenth century, and following this example, singing groups and choirs were also established in Latvia. The Latvians took over the idea of the Song Celebration from the Baltic Germans and organized the Latvian Men's Choir Song Celebration in 1864 at Dikļi (6 choirs with 120 singers took part), but the first Nationwide Latvian Song Celebration took place in 1873 in Rīgā. Over time, the

³⁶ The author of the photograph was Vilis Ridzenieks (1884–1962), the only photographer who headed to the theatre on the evening of 18 November 1918. No other photographer was officially invited to record the official moment of the birth of the Republic of Latvia. The legendary 120x170 cm photo was prepared by him a few years after Latvia's proclamation. The photograph sat for many years in the window of his workshop in Rīga on Vaļņu Street. During the Soviet years, the photograph was preserved behind a photograph of Stalin and later the photos of other communist leaders.

³⁷ The People's Council decided to proclaim an independent Latvian state on 18 November 2018.

³⁸ The Song Celebration is now called the Nationwide Latvian Song and Dance Celebration.

Song Celebration became a symbol of national identity, and there is good reason why Latvians consider themselves to be a nation of singers. The Song Celebration is one of the main forms of Latvian cultural expression and the most important confirmation of Latvian cultural identity in the twenty-first century.³⁹

Conclusion

The National History Museum of Latvia not only accumulates and stores unique items as historical evidence, but also interprets history, making choices and exhibiting items. The *Latvia's Century* exhibition can be evaluated as a redefinition of national identity, which has developed over the course of the century and which explains who we are at present. In the exhibition, the curators have chosen to exhibit objects of a religious nature, which are rich in symbolism and meaning, and this allows for broad and deep interpretations to be made which reflect the interaction between the religious and the secular.

This case study demonstrates that religion is recognized in Latvia as a constitutive element of collective identity. Here the question is no longer whether religion matters, but how. The categories *secular* and *religious* have therefore become deeply intertwined in the presentation on the formation of national identity at the *Latvia's Century* exhibition. Religion, in the case of Latvia – Christianity, is seen as a civilizational matrix, i.e. as a matrix of cultural practices. One could talk in one respect about the culturalization of religion: religious items or items of a religious nature are interpreted as cultural items. In this way, the *memory* of a religious past is transformed into the broader notion of cultural patrimony.

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³⁹ In 2018, the Song Celebration was the culmination of Latvia's centenary events: 43,000 participants and half a million onlookers took part in it.

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Anita Stasulane, professor of history of religions and the director of the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences at Daugavpils University (Latvia). Her primary research interests cover new religious movements, youth studies and subcultures. Lately she is conducting research on radicalism. She has published a monography Theosophy and Culture: Nicholas Roerich (2005) and is author of about 70 academic articles, the latest are: Female leaders in a radical right movement: the Latvian National Front (2017), Activity of Hindu-Related Movements and Western Esoteric Groups in Latvia (2015), Factors determining the political participation of Muslim youth in Latvia (2015), The Dynamics of Christian-Muslim Relationships (2015). She is a member of European Sociological Association (ESA), European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR), International Study of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe Association (ISORECEA), and European Society for the Study of Western Esoterism (ESSWE). She is also editor-in-chief of Kultūras Studijas (Cultural Studies), and a member of editorial board of Cultural and Religious Studies (USA), Social Sciences Bulletin (Latvia), The Lithuanian Journal of Anthropology (Lithuania), Ethnologia Actualis: The Journal of Ethnographical Research (Slovakia), Groups and Environments (Lithuania), and Soter (Lithuania).