Religious Toleration and Peace

Coordinator:
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
Oude Markt 13, Leuven 3000, Belgium
info@retopea.eu, www.retopea.eu

**Merve Kayikci and Lidija Georgieva**



# Policy report with regard to the public representation of religion in museums

## Final report

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## Introduction

Besides studying religious diversity, coexistence and toleration, RETOPEA critically analyzed how religion is represented today in social media, museums, political discourses, educational institutions and initiatives by contemporary religious movements[1]. The aim of this research was to understand how the representation of religion to the public affects its relationship with social actors. Our recommendations are important to address the impact of macro-structures (politics, media, cultural institutions, educational contexts) on public opinion on religious pluralism, creating belonging in pluralistic societies, and maintaining social cohesion.

The recommendations set forth in this policy paper address cultural policy-makers, directors of cultural heritage institutions, politicians, media representatives and companies. The matters that are subject to discussion in this report demand urgent attention as the representation of religion (and religious diversity) in mainstream media and cultural institutions has a direct impact on the identity formation of individuals, groups and especially youngsters. It also has an impact on the sense of belonging of religious minorities.

The unique aspect of our research is that it includes our observations of young people and their reactions to examples of political discourses, cultural representations and educational material concerned with religious diversity. This is especially significant since young people are the main focus group of RETOPEA.

This section of our research has been guided by four main questions:

1. How can we better understand the contemporary landscape of religions, secularism and spirituality through an analysis of contemporary representations of religious coexistence in media, particularly addressing youth?
2. How can we find ways in which the (religious) past is invoked to either oppose or enhance toleration and peaceful coexistence?
3. How can we produce primary source material that can constitute the base for constructing the docutubes as described in WP 5?
4. How can we formulate recommendations to stimulate toleration and peaceful coexistence among youth, in particular how and to which extent references to historical practices could be invoked to construct alternative narratives where distorted views of history hamper toleration and peaceful coexistence?

As our questions indicate, our analytical focus is not only limited to various religious beliefs and movements, but also extends to include different spiritual beliefs and secularism, as each country's historical relationship between the church and state has an impact on how their relationship with other (non-Christian) religions are designed. We also acknowledge that religious beliefs consist of much wider variety than organized religion and many people have spiritual leanings and lifestyles even though they may not follow a specific religious domination.

Our main conclusions can be summarized as follows: religion and culture are inextricably intertwined. Religious narratives, practices and spiritual experiences have historically been expressed through cultural mediums. The cultural expression of religious lifeworlds has

[1] Altnurme, Riho, Elena Arigita, and Patrick Pasture, eds. *Religious Diversity in Europe: Mediating the Past to the Young*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022.

clearly indicated that the history of humanity is relational and connected. Despite the secularization of the West, religion is still an important factor in the lifeworlds of individuals and societies. Religion is a fundamental aspect of the identities of many people and has the power to merge individuals in the same society or create social friction.

In recent years, religion has been discussed in the context of fundamentalism and violence and (public) narratives of certain religious groups have tethered on hate speech and xenophobia. Our workshops with young people have clearly shown that the way in which religious groups are represented in culture, media and politics has a profound impact on their sense of self and belonging. Observations have shown exclusionary representations can create discomfort and isolation among the young.

However, religion is also a significant part of everyday choices people make beyond rituals and rites. It informs dress-code, food consumption, morals, behavior and day-to-day social interactions. Our findings and conclusions point out that a deeper understanding and appreciation of differences in how religious groups design their daily practices can open avenues for interfaith/cultural dialogue in cultural institutions, education, politics and media.

Our aim is to facilitate the contribution of citizens in the development of cultural policy. We want to advance the existing policies of the EU in the areas of identity making and cultural heritage.

The examples of Culture 2000 (2000-2013) and Creative Europe (2014-2020) as well as the 2016 Joint Communication on EU international cultural relations , show continuity and emphasize cultural diversity as an important trump card both within the EU and in its international relations. This communication linked culture with sustainable social and economic development to promote cultural heritage cooperation, as well as intercultural dialogue for peaceful inter-community relations). In this context, the Declaration of European Identity, signed in Copenhagen in 1973 by the then nine Member States, can be seen as the starting point for the official discourse on the idea of European identity and leaded towards "United in Diversity" as a European slogan that has been translated in the European Agenda for Culture in the Globalizing World (2007), Strengthening European Identity through Education and Cultural (Joint Action 2017), "New European Cultural Agenda" (2018) aimed at promoting European values, solidarity, peace and reconciliation, democracy, rule of law, social justice and respect for human rights. In recent years, the EU identity-building discourse has been called controversial and abused by nationalist actors who defend that identity with xenophobic, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic, sexist or anti-immigrant positions.

The Creative Europe programme supports Europe's cultural heritage (tangible, intangible and digital) as a shared source of remembrance, understanding, identity dialogue, cohesion and creativity. The programme supports national initiatives in promotion of cultural heritage by private and public bodies-museums, libraries and archives. RETOPEA can provide valuable resources for marking the connections between religion and culture and support dialogue in this and other cultural programmes of the EU.

## 1. Research Overview

Our researchers have conducted empirical research in **Jewish museums, Islam exhibitions, and Balkan museums.** The research was conducted in various European countries over the period of two years (2018-2020). Researchers visited national museums, ethnographic and art museums and the House of European History. They collected such material data as photographs and fragments of video clips from the museums. In some cases they interviewed

museum staff (e.g. curators, outreach staff) about the exhibitions, past exhibitions and future plans. They interviewed event organizers who were involved in the making of temporary exhibitions. Researchers also observed how each exhibition was structured, the different elements and people that were involved in the making of an exhibition, the architectural design of museums and its significance on the message they aimed to convey.

Museums are important and dynamic spaces where visitors can learn about historical events, objects and people. Museums also have the potential to be more inclusive in their narratives of history and can create a space for discussion and exchange abour religion, toleration and peace. We consider inclusive representation to be an important goal for museums, which implies incorporating matters pertaining to gender, race, social status and class in the cultural sphere. In terms of educational significance, museums offer an excellent opportunity for teachers and educators to engage their students and to apply more nuanced and critical history approaches.

## 2. General Findings

Many museums include objects related to religion in their collections. However, sometimes the religious tradition that inspired a certain form of art, or the religious context of a historical period is ignored because it is viewed as irrelevant or divisive vis a vis national discourses.

When religion appears, as in museums about Jewish heritage and Islam in Europe, often the question about the 'ownership' of religion appears as well: not regarding the artefacts, but of the implicitly presented narratives. Questions that are discussed by museum workers and scholars concern who 'owns' the right to represent and construct 'Jewish' or 'Muslim' history? They try to discern if it is the religious community or secular authorities who are to have agency in the representation of religious history. They also ask what the role of academics, historians and museum specialists is in writing narratives of religious history and traditions. Although there is a network of Jewish museums, there are no museums designated especially for Islam, Christianity or other religions. Jewish museums in general address topics that concern other religious communities. While they aim to educate visitors on Jewish culture and tradition, teach lessons from history, fight prejudices, and confront stereotypes, they invite dialogue and debate, and ask questions. Teachers and educators can find a good place for discussions.

1. The representation of Islamic history is problematic in most museums all across Europe. The collections portray Islam as having inspired great works of art in pre-modern eras. They lack a certain continuity of history and insinuate that Islam is still stuck in those pre-modern times. Many Islamic collections of these museums were acquired in the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. At that time Islamic art was perceived as inferior to European art although some circles appreciated it as pre-a modern and authentic alternative for a modernizing Europe. One can see a repetition of this narrative in current exhibitions, where Islamic art is represented as 'glorious' but stuck in the past, unable to modernize, unable to tell us a story of continuation of the Islamic tradition into modernity. In the museal representations the 'Islamic 'world' is homogenized as one entity, whose only reference is the Islamic religion, ignoring cultural, ethnic, racial, and even religious differences within that world.
2. Some museums are more aware of diversity and the mobility of people, ideas and beliefs. They try to integrate Muslim youth in their activities and try to be more inclusive in the content and form of their exhibitions. They aim to emphasize the 'Dutch' Muslim or 'German' Muslim identities of their participants instead of othering Muslims as 'migrants' and newcomers to the country. The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam, and its "Longing for Mecca" exhibition is a good example for how exhibitions can discuss

intersectionalities of identities. The Neues Museum in Berlin had an exhibition that focused on how Arabic literature influenced German literature and the different literary works that emerged from these interactions. This is also a good example of how art and ideas travel across geographies and traditions.

3. Many museums, such as the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, complain of not being able to reach and include minority children. In this case, Muslim youth who often live in the suburbs of the cities which are quite far from the elite spaces where national museums are located. Some museums, such as the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin, have rooms with no exhibition. Museum workers want to use these rooms for interactive exchanges but have difficulties developing agendas. Due to COVID19 and the lockdown many museums developed online access and virtual tours which offer new opportunities to connect with schools and youth. Rather than bringing people to the museum it enabled them to bring the museum to the people.
4. RETOPEA did not investigate war museums, although such museums may be open for 'learning from history'. One should perhaps also consider establishing peace museums and incite them to consider paying attention to dialogue and religious peacemaking.

Having in consideration general content and findings our team developed specific findings and recommendations for improvement of public representation of religion in museums.

## 3. Findings Concerning Jewish Museums

The first observation concerning Jewish museums in Europe is that there is a **rise** of such museums: In the last four decades, many Jewish museums have sprung up in Europe and many older ones have been renovated and rebuilt. They are aimed at a wide audience: citizens (of a city and country), tourists, mostly non-Jews (members of the local Jewish community or Jewish tourists are only part of the audience). This must be understood as an expression of the need for European societies to deal with their difficult Jewish history, to break the silence that surrounded the Shoah for several decades.

Another observation is about a **loose relation between Jewish museums and Jewish communities**: meaning the oldest Jewish museums were established before the Second World War and they were **Jewish communal institutions** (Budapest, Prague, Vienna, Amsterdam). Most of those communities and most of those museums ceased to exist after the war. It is obvious that contemporary Jewish museums in Europe are mostly established and run by non-Jews (if this finding is of particular importance). Only in some rare cases a Jewish museum is run by or connected to the Jewish community as it is the case with the London Jewish museum or Skopje Jewish Museum.

The main task of Jewish museums in Europe is to **preserve and represent the history of Jewish life in a particular city, country or region**. Their objective is to **keep alive the memory of the centuries of Jewish presence in that context and display a multi-ethnic past**. Still it must be noticed most of the Jewish Museums in **Europe are not Holocaust museums.** Therefore, they should not be regarded as martyrological commemorative museums. There are some holocaust museums to commemorate the Shoah, but the narratives of these museums also aim to show the life before the Shoah.

Most Jewish communities generally support the establishment of Jewish museums in their cities or states. They see in this an opportunity to recover lost history not only for themselves but also for the national public. At the same time, most Jewish museums, although they are non-Jewish institutions, strive for good cooperation with local Jewish communities or local Jewish institutions.

- One of the findings is that there are various types of Jewish museums: some based on collections but some do not have representative collections and their exhibits are based **on reconstruction and multimedia** (as a result of significant destruction of Jewish material). Most contemporary Jewish museums place special emphasis on telling the story and creating a coherent narrative. Jewish museums convey their missions and narratives not only **through exhibits, but also through their locations and architecture.** In this way they connect past and present, transmit continuity and express the hope of repair and renewal. There are also many museums in newly designed buildings that are characterized by symbolic and expressive architecture (often by world-famous architects)
- The historical exhibitions of Jewish museums share a **general meta-historical approach**. They emphasize the connections between Jewish history and the history of the country, region or city. They present the local history as shared by different groups that lived on that territory. Presenting the relations between the Jews and the local population they emphasize the coexistence that embraced both cooperation and mutual influences as well as moments of crisis. The emphasis is put on **cultural pluralism, historical change and different points of view:** they present the variety of Judaism and different forms of being Jewish, as well as different forms of relations between Jews and non-Jews.
- Jewish museums devote a lot of effort and resources to **broader cultural activities**. Especially important are their **temporary exhibitions and educational programs** that are often linked to contemporary problems. These activities become crucial for fulfilling museums' missions of being centers of social dialogue and debate.

- During discussions with our researchers, the former director and staff members of the POLIN Museum said they worked closely with communities in structuring their exhibitions.

## 3.1 Discussion of findings

- Jewish museums are important cultural spaces that have provided many excellent examples of teaching religious diversity and initiating interfaith/cultural dialogue. These dialogues are mainly thanks to the museum's cooperation with Jewish communities, although the management of these museums is not necessarily directly linked to communities.
- One of the main objectives of Jewish museums is that they want to question normative assumptions of identity and place. They want to critically engage with the idea that certain places are linked with one cultural identity and they want to make the cultural diversity of places and the history of coexistence more vivid in the social memory. Our observations have indicated that regardless of its aim, Jewish museums do focus on certain contemporary discussions concerning identity/place, especially those pertaining to the Jewish diaspora.
- Inclusion, openness and democracy are central narratives in Jewish museums. It is partly an explicit narrative to engage with the new narrative about European values. However, Jewish museums do not always give much attention to gendered experiences, sexual minorities within the Jewish community or racial minorities such as Black Jews. Therefore, the history of these communities are less visible and sometimes not visible at all. Moreover, Jewish museums are still very much limited in their outreach. Their activities still could be more inclusive to those members of society whose are disadvantaged.

- Jewish museums were created in counter position to the trauma caused by the Shoah. Although they acknowledge the trauma, they engage with history before and after the Shoah in order to show the rich diversity within the Jewish tradition and religion. They do not want to show events as leading to the Shoah and they want to present the past in its all complexity and richness. They present the Shoah as part of history, as its most tragic chapter, and even if they have a commemorative space, they are part of a larger museum complex (e.g. Amsterdam, Vilnius, Skopje). They also show that despite the Shoah Jewish life has not completely ended. They emphasize the idea of "continuity" and attempt to link the past and the present, showing new forms of Jewish life in the contemporary world. In this way they open up to the future and communicate hope for renewal and reparation (the best example can be the Jewish Museum Berlin designed by Daniel Libeskind or POLIN Museum in Warsaw).
- Jewish museums devote a lot of efforts and resources to broader cultural activities. Especially important are their temporary exhibitions and educational programs that are often linked to contemporary problems. These activities become crucial for fulfilling museums' missions of being a center of social dialogue and debate. It has become especially important in recent years when the new social and political conflicts that appeared after relatively calmer 1990s have set a new framework for Jewish museums. Some of them start to get beyond particularly Jewish topics and reach more universal issues. Through their activities they try to give voice to the excluded minorities and take actions against any forms of discrimination or exclusion – be it related to race, religion, gender, nationality etc. They promote the idea of civic society and openness to dialogue and cultural pluralism.

- Jewish museums collaborate with communities, which allows them to have better insight into current debates, and the needs and desires of communities. Working with communities opens the way for a more nuanced representations in their exhibitions. While collaborating with communities has many advantages, museums need to tread carefully in this area. Communities are not homogenous entities and museums need to be aware that those community actors with whom they collaborate are often the most visible ones. Therefore, those segments of communities who are lesser visible or socially marginalised (women/LGBT/low income groups/racial minorities) will have lesser opportunities to collaborate. Therefore, their memories, narratives and knowledge will not be represented in museums, even if those museums collaborate with communities.

- Although Jewish museums cover a wide range of topics beyond Jewish history, culture and religion, there have yet to explore other experiences relating to gender and class.

## 3.2 Recommendations

- Jewish museums could still reach out more to representatives of different religions, schools, teachers, and other youth organizations to include them in their activities concerning pluralism. Activities and exhibitions organized by these museums can provide good examples of how to discuss and teach young people about sensitive topics pertaining to cultural/religious differences, dialogue and cohesion.
- Building on the first point, if teachers and those people who work on developing curricula include museum collaborations in school work they can more effectively enhance students' engagement with history. These historical engagements need to include reflections on the present if students are to require abilities of critical thinking in matters.

- Museums are often located in districts and neighbourhoods that are difficult to be accessed by students. This is especially true in cities that have high gentrification, where minority children often live at a distance from important art, ethnographic and national museums. Therefore, if museums create interactive websites designed especially for students' easy access to their collections and activities, those who are disadvantaged will also benefit. Network of European Museum Organizations showed less than 20% of museum's collections were available online. Taking the COVID-19 pandemic in consideration, museums urgently need to address the deficiency of their websites and learning tools.
- A suggestion for Jewish museums is to engage with products of contemporary writers, artists, performers etc. to better have a more nuanced and balanced discussion on identity and place. Massoud Hayoun published a book, "When were were Arabs: A Jewish familiy's forgotten history" in 2019 that details the historical experiences of a Jewish-Arab family. The book talks about political turmoil, intersectional identities and the search to "reclaim identity", which has been deemed atypical in the current political climate. Jewish museums need to engage with such narratives more and engage with complicated historical narratives. By inviting such writers to their venues and giving a space for them to engage with the public, museums can become a party to current public debates.
- Some Islam exhibitions are inviting cooks, musicians, performers to exhibitions to show the continuity of cultural history. Cooks show how food that was traditionally enjoyed by Muslims are cooked today with contemporary material. Some Jewish cooks such as Yotam Ottolenghi are doing similar things in their books, and Jewish museums can show how such a basic thing as food can be great indicator of how culture changes, develops and comes into interaction with other cultures.
- Jewish museums need to be more mindful that there is a power dynamic within communities and this has a direct impact on social collaborations. Museums need to actively reach out to lesser visible actors.
- Despite exploring topics ranging from culinary culture to wartime Europe, Jewish museums are still lacking when it comes to gender related topics. We recommend museums engage with phenomena pertaining to masculinities and femininities, and the lesser known stories of sexual minorities.

## 4. Findings on Islam collections in museums

- Most of the museums structure their collections in a way that is still embedded in colonial perceptions of Islam as a pre-modern religious tradition. These museums' Islam collections were acquired in a certain period of history, where Islamic art was seen as 'subordinate' to European art but at the same a pre-modern and authentic muse for modernizing Europe. There is a repetition of this narrative in current exhibitions, where Islamic art is represented as 'glorious' but stuck in the past, unable to modernize, unable to tell us a story of continuation of the Islamic tradition into modernity;
- Islam collections create the impression that the "Islamic World" is a homogenous entity, although the religion was part of a wide geography.The main thread that runs through these collections in the Islamic tradition. Ethnic, racial, cultural and even religious differences and nuances are often absent from these collections. Therefore, the visitor gets the impression that the way in which Islam is lived and experienced is globally the same. Schools of law, different interpretations of Islam, and cultural nuances are rarely conveyed.
- The narratives of those Muslims who are not part of the hegemony such as women, black Muslims, slaves, migrants and refugees are left out of historical representation.

Hence, museum visitors of such backgrounds say exhibitions do not speak to them or reflect their experiences.

- Especially young people of migration background find the lack of diversity in the collections [and the representation of their experiences] a great shortcoming of museums.
- The heritage of “those who have migrated” are largely missing from these museums. Islam is often restricted to a particular geography, and detached from historical and contemporary migration flows.
- Curators and visitors problematize the very visible homogenization of Islam and Muslims as a population that is confined to one geographical area (the Middle East and North Africa).
- Apart from the Berlin Museum of Islamic Arts, museums do not address the history of acquisitions and the (political, social, historical) circumstances under which objects and artefacts were obtained. There is still a selective representation of Islam and Muslims.
- Many art museums have put a lot of effort in representing the glory and magnificence of Islamic civilizations, but do not sufficiently engage with the “difficult aspects” of history. Colonial history and interactions and how they are lived and experienced in the modern world are missing in the exhibitions.
- The museums that try to be more diverse still work within an institutional hierarchy. There is a general acknowledgement that only certain types of programs are funded by the national and European funding bodies. Most museums do not or will not cooperate with Muslim communities in a meaningful way or include their archives in their collections.
- It is unclear what exactly is "Islamic" in Islam exhibitions. Many objects that are mundane and have no connection to religion are also presented in these exhibitions.

## 4.1 Discussion of findings

- The way in which the ‘Islamic World’ is homogenized as one entity, whose only reference is the Islamic religion, ignoring cultural, ethnic, racial, and even religious differences within that world is awkwardly patronizing for the Muslim (and non-Muslim) audience.
- Most of museums with Islam collections are unable to update their collections to address contemporary social and political debates, sometimes rooted in colonial and racial understandings of the Muslim world. In this regard they do not speak to the so-called European Muslim populations, the experiences of minorities and those who have been pushed to the margins of society.
- Museums are still ignoring the fact that there are European/American/African Muslims who have historical ties to these continents and have contributed to their civilizations. There are only a few museums that seemingly address this issue; for instance, the Berlin Museum of Islamic Art includes the history of acquisitions in their collections touching upon the history of colonial interactions. An exhibition organized by KU Leuven’s KADOC also organized an exhibition called *Veldlijnen. ontmoetingen met islam tussen fascinatie en afkeer* (“Fieldlines: Encounters with Islam between fascination and avoidance”). This exhibition is a great example of how (European) museums and archives can engage with historical ties between Europe and Islam. The exhibition displayed archives collected by the Catholic church and colonial officers who travelled to the Middle East and North Africa. It also displayed archives of Muslim thinkers and activists who travelled to Europe between the two world wars. These exhibitions show how Europe’s history is inextricably intertwined with that of the Islamic world.
- Contemporary debates such as radicalization, poverty, poor education, are hugely absent in museum narratives. Instead Islamic art is presented as “glorious” but also pre-modern.

There is, however, the endeavor to represent a 'decaffeinated' Muslim - the Muslim who is integrated into the cultural and artistic scene, the artistic-hip-cool Muslim. This creates the impression that Muslims - and Islam - are only part of Europe as much as they conform to an artistic and cultural norm. Those others who have difficult realities and struggles are then considered as non-integrated, incompatible, and as the "other". Museums still have trouble discussing sensitive and difficult topics and representing these realities to the public[2].

- Scholars[3] have explored what exactly is Islamic about Islamic art. Most of them have criticized museums' lose use of the term and the over-simplificaton of the Islamic religion, culture, and geography. In one case, a curator said they tried to simplify Islamic history as much as possible to make it "comprehensable" to the visitors. However, Shia Muslim and Sunni Muslim visitors expressed discomfort at being homogenized under the same title as the "Islamic world". Moreover, other Muslim visitors expressed discomfort seeing objects that were mundane (or even blasphemous) presented under Islamic art.

## 4.2 Recommendations

- The museums need to practice diversity and inclusion more effectively. In order to do this, they can collaborate more with communities and community heritage groups. Community heritage groups are on the rise among Muslims in Europe. Museums can benefit from their knowledge, archives and exhibitions by giving them a space and autonomy to choose the story they want to tell about themselves. If museums engage with community and university archives more, instead of sticking to official canonical history they can have a more race and gender inclusive narrative of Islamic history.
- Community heritage groups such as Framer-Framed, (A)Wake (Netherlands) and the Everyday Muslim Organization (UK) which really work with community archives and resources gain very little recognition from funding bodies and still remain under the radar. We recommend that museums collaborate with these local organizations and help them gain literacy in applying for culture funds, and developing outreach programs.
- We suggest that current (permanent) Islam exhibitions in major museums (Louvre, Rijksmuseum, Brussels Museum of Art and History, Berlin Museum for Islamic Art etc) revise their collections to be more nuanced and inclusive. By this we mean they need to include the stories of women, LGBTQ, racial minorities, Black Muslims, Muslims in the west and those others who are not part of the mainstream. In order to do this, they should organize programs and events where diverse community groups are included in their space. These museums need to amplify the voices of the under-represented and revise the paternalistic gaze of their exhibitions. Many curators are already aware of these problems; therefore, museum management need to give more agency to curators in developing inclusive exhibitions.

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[2] Kayikci, M.R., Sztyma, T., Manasievska, M., Trajanovski, N. (2022) "Society exhibited: Museums, religions and representation." In *Religious Diversity in Europe: Mediating the Past to the Young*, P. eds., I. B. Tauris: London, UK.

[3] Shatanawi, M., 2012. Curating against dissent: Museums and the public debate on Islam. *Political and cultural representations of Muslims: Islam in the plural*, pp.177-192.
Shaw, W.M., 2019. *What is "Islamic" Art?: Between Religion and Perception*. Cambridge University Press.

- Museums need to develop ways to make their exhibitions more attractive and meaningful to youth, especially those that are at the margins of society. Our previous recommendations have already suggested ways to do this but museums also need to take gentrification into consideration. Many museums are located far from migrant neighborhoods. Therefore, museums need to reach out to schools through educational outreach programs, collaborate with teachers and make themselves more accessible to the young. For example, the Everyday Muslim organization takes their exhibitions to schools and displays them in school halls and corridors.
- We recommend that museums work with academic scholars and activists to reflect on the matter of religion and discern the meaning of Islam in their Islamic exhibitions. A critical debate about mundane/secular would be beneficial for art and ethnographic museums. Museums can also benefit from the feedback of their visitors. In one case the Berlin Museum of Islamic Art carried out a workshop with students, who gave their impressions on objects that were in the museum's archives. Some of these impressions involved criticism from Muslim students about the way objects were classified as "religious" when they were not sacred or religious according to their beliefs. By organizing such workshops other museums would gain tremendous insight. Jewish museums are adament that they do not only exhibit religious

## 5. Findings on museums in the Balkan

Before we present RETOPEA findings on Balkan museums it is worth mentioning that there is an ongoing process of more or less successful transformation of their mission and goals aiming to change the perception of being exclusively nationalist institutions. The establishment of the Balkan Museum Network (BMN) in April 2006 marked a willingness for cooperation between eleven Balkan museums, specifically from the Western Balkans, that faced hostilities and conflicts since 1991(Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia). An important dimension in this respect was the creation of a special network for female museum directors aimed at the specific needs of this group and to eventually introduce gender aspects into museum programs. Obviously, the need for a change of mission, goals and cultural role of Balkans museums seemed widely shared, while there are challenges making these goals difficult to achieve. The BMN has set as its mission to change museums in the Balkans by: (a) supporting the development of creative museum leaders; (b) advocating socially responsible museums that promote and celebrate learning; and, through cooperation; (c) to advance the principles of peace and reconciliation using the Balkans common heritage as its springboard for current and future generations are promising. The research of RETOPEA, which included a large selection of museums from the Western Balkans without being comprehensive, identified both shortcomings and positive developments in museums.

- In general, an ethno-centric mode of representing national histories is prevalent in the history museums in the analyzed Balkan states. The museal exhibitions are oftentimes portraying symbolic enemies of the nation, nation-state and the national culture. The research showed, as well, that certain private historical museums are also following this tendency of showcasing an ethno-centric mode of historical narration.
- Museums especially designated to religion(s) are rare phenomena in the region (with the exception of religious organizations' museums, i.e. the church museum in Zadar, Croatia). There are some collections in history museums that refer to religion. If they are treated as a separate exhibition, that is usually as part of ethnographic museums.
- In the city museum of Bitola (North Macedonia), religion is represented as a part of different ethnic communities. There is no separate exhibition for religion, however it is

integrated in exhibitions concerning the histories of ethnic groups in the city.The history of Bitola is represented in a way that shows the interactions with the Ottoman and Turkish republican past. For example, the culture, tradition and art of Bitola during the Ottoman rule is presented as local interpretations of Ottoman (and Muslim) influence. There is a commemoration room of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (founder of modern Turkey), which has a celebratory but still neutral tone.

- Religion became more prominent after some of the Balkan countries joined the EU. Whether in positive or in negative context (depending on the idea of the exhibition) religion became more present in museums as well as getting a permanent spot in museums halls.

## 5.1 Discussion of findings

- Museums in the Balkans engage with religion as part of their national and ethnic identities.
- Ethnic groups are strongly associated with religious denominations. Moreover, political trends have a deep impact on museum narratives. Ever since some Balkan countries entered the EU, their exhibitions have focused on the historical and cultural connection of their nations with Western Europe and other EU member states. In the galleries of the National museums in Ljubljana and in Sofia we can see various representations of these connections.
- There is a general tendency to avoid engaging with the histories of ethnic minorities.
- As we have mentioned before, religion emerges as a divisive force in museum exhibitions. Distinctions such as “Us vs. Them” are very apparent. The religion of minorities is rarely celebrated as part of a national religious mosaic.
- There are serious time gaps in museum exhibitions that need to be addressed. These time gaps coincide mostly with the Ottoman rule period, which is missing as a whole. This is all the more regrettable as Ottoman history is widely misrepresented, among other is political discourse, while it may (without idealizing toleration and living together) offer plenty of information to think creatively about how to accommodate and ‘manage’ cultural diversities.
- Some exhibitions concerning famous people (such as Mustafa Kemal Ataturk), have a neutral tone and expect the visitor to form their own opinion of the person. It honors the person, and takes pride in the history but keeps the narrative somewhat neutral.

## 5.2 Recommendations

- There are many aspects and examples from the past that indicate co-existence was part of the everyday life in the region, such as inter-ethnic marriages or customs, or common use of religious buildings. These examples show that the coexistence of different religious and ethnic communities is not a recent development. Bringing these examples back to the social memory will enrich existing exhibitions to present diversity and toleration among ethnic and religious communities in the Balkans.
- Issues pertaining to religious intolerance, conflicts, and political developments need to be contextualized on a national or regional level, since the Western Balkan states are not always seen as part of Europe (aside from not being in the EU as a region).
- Besides material goods, museums need to exhibit non-material goods (by focusing on intangible heritage, local customs etc.) or legacy of world heritage;
- The museum need to provide public space for education, learning and research on cultural and religious diversity for different audience including schools and universities;

## 6. General recommendations with regard to the public representation of religion in museums

- Work towards the decolonization of museums. The input of expert scholars in this field and heritage activists (e.g. Black Heritage Tours in Amsterdam, Everyday Muslim Organization, Imagine IC, Framer Framed) should be sought.
- Museums should conduct a self-assessment with tools such as NEMO (Network of European Muslim Organizations. https://www.ne-mo.org/news/article/nemo/official-start-of-moi-museums-of-impact-a-new-european-tool-that-will-help-museums-increase-their-im.html.
- There is substantial learning material in the RETOPEA clippings collection that can be used by museums. Clippings developed by RETOPEA researchers can be used by museums, schools, and other educative institutions to learn about the history of religious pluralism in Europe. They can use RETOPEA interactive online tools and organize workshops with young people to produce "docutubes" to encourage critical thinking.
- The MOI (Museums of Impact) impact framework for museums is not an impact measurement tool, or a quality assessment of museum processes; instead, it helps museums to review and develop their activities in a way that will increase their impact in society, be more focused, more resilient, and more effective in their operations.[4]
- The Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), developed by ICOM to encourage museums to explore a series of methodologies for social inclusion, can be an effective learning tool for museums, who can use it to share knowledge with new audiences.
- The GREASE project made a few relevant films that can be effective learning tools as well (Learning - GREASE).
- Besides collaboration with educational institutions on different levels, museums need to demonstrate how education takes place in museums settings; to identify learning strategies for variety of audiences; and to adjust museum education to Covid circumstances.
- Art, ethnographic and national museums are in need of revising their approach to different religious traditions in Europe that are not historically seen as part of Europe, including Islam and Judaism. Museums can make use of online tools to acquire the input from community actors in achieving this. Regular online meetings with scholars, community heritage groups, and activists can help achieve sustainable exchange and discussions. Museums can include community heritage groups in their activities, for example in Belgium and the Netherlands museum nights are popular yearly events where there is great public attention. By including community archives in their popular events museums can create greater public awareness.
- The Everyday Muslim Organization has created a “UK Muslim Trail”, which is a map that points at important Muslim heritage sites in the UK. Similar “heritage trails” can be developed in other countries with the joint effort of scholars, museums and community actors in order to show the history of diverse religious communities in Europe. As an ethnographic museum with great academic contacts, the Tropenmuseum is a good candidate to develop such a heritage trail. Additionally, the Louvre Museum has the resources to develop such a trail in France and can use the expertise of the L’institut du Monde Arabe.

[4] Finnish Heritage Agency, FI; BAM! Strategie Culturali, IT; Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports, EL; Deutscher Museumsbund/NEMO Network of Museum Organisations, DE; Museum of Cycladic Art, EL; Estonian National Museum/Eesti Rahva Muuseum, EE; Finnish Museums Association, FI; European Museum Academy, NL; Museum Council of Iceland, IS; Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz SPK, DE; and MUSIS Steirischer Museumsverband, AT.

- In this regard mosques can play an important role in providing archival material and we suggest museums to connect with their local mosques and Islamic culture centers.
- Bringing the museum to the youth instead of the other way around can be an effective approach. The Everyday Muslim organization takes their exhibitions to schools and display them in school halls and corridors. This is an example of how museums can develop 'travelling exhibitions' for young people which can be scaled up. Support pilot projects which aim to bring the museum to children.
- In February 2020, A(Wake), a community art group in Rotterdam, created a digital 3D exhibition in a warehouse. The warehouse was located in a “migrant neighbourhood” and attracted the attention of many young people from diverse backgrounds. Such “digital exhibitions” are highly popular among young people and if museums devote resources to develop them, their outreach will improve. Such digital exhibitions can also be displayed online and schools can be given special access so their students can enjoy them. Community heritage organizations and those run by younger generations have a lot of literacy in digital archiving and display. Museums can make use of their knowledge and experience.
- Artists, curators, and performers are very mobile. Before the pandemic many artists and storytellers from North Africa and the Middle East travelled to Europe to connect with young people and discuss topics pertaining to heritage. They also showed that heritage is dynamic and interactive. Museums need to embrace this reality and invite such people to perform or talk in their events.
- Museums need to acknowledge the importance of oral sources in heritage formation and preservation. They not only have the duty to preserve and represent “material heritage” but also oral heritage such as stories, poems, songs etc. These often give us an insight into a much diverse history. Mezrab, a storytelling platform in Amsterdam, provides storytellers a platform to engage with their heritage and many young people attend their storytelling nights. Focusing only on material heritage is an approach that values a specific way of archiving that is primarily European. This approach discredits the heritage and narratives of other (non-Western) communities, whose archiving focuses on memorising stories, songs, poems and preserving certain natural sites (e.g. olive trees in the Middle East).
- Develop blank spaces for topical reasons/initiatives, such as inviting popular musicians, artists, storytellers, so that these spaces become spaces for interaction, sharing and mutual understanding.