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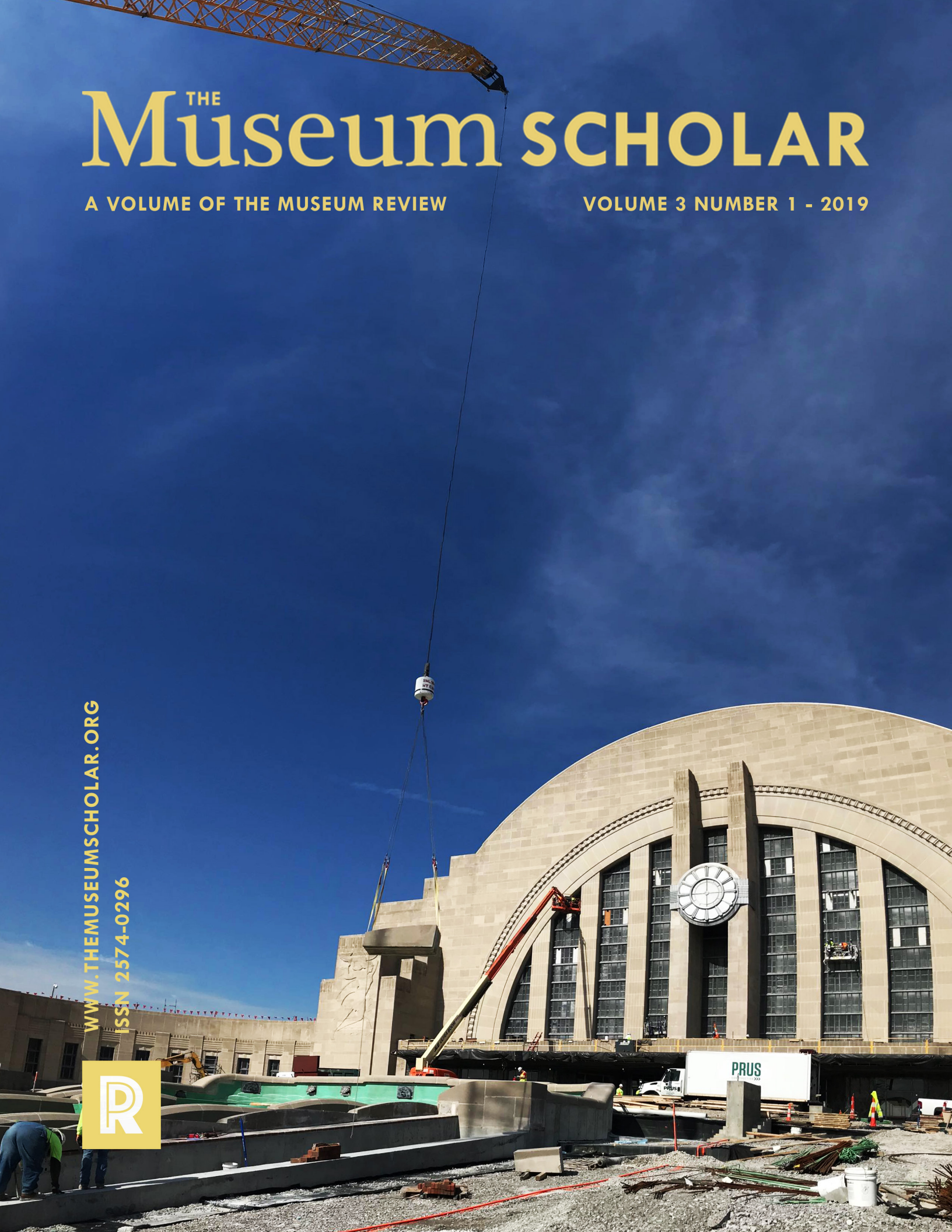

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Book Review: *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites*, edited by Gretchen Buggeln and Barbara Franco

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Cover photo: Restoring the exterior of the Cincinnati Museum Center, Ohio, as part of the two-year renovation. Reopened 2018. Photo by Maria Dehne – Cincinnati Museum Center.

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Keywords Religion; Museum Interpretation; Education; Case Studies; Museums

Abstract Recognizing and interpreting diversity brings new challenges to public historians, and this is certainly true when it comes to religion. In a new volume for the American Association for State and Local History's *Interpreting History* series, Barbara Franco, Gretchen Buggeln, and other professionals from museums and historic sites explore the difficulties and rewards of interpreting religious history to audiences which may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the topic. The book provides no blanket solutions but offers a variety of strategies that can be applied to a range of situations. The authors stress tenets of good historical interpretation, from listening and responding to visitors to being adaptable in the face of internal and external challenges.

About the Author Hannah Overstreet is a Public History MA student at Loyola University Chicago with interests in exhibition development and interpretation. She has previously interned with the Field Museum's Exhibitions and Botany departments and worked at the Anderson University and Church of God Archives. She is currently a Sesquicentennial Scholar at the Women and Leadership Archives, where she is developing an Omeka exhibition for Loyola University Chicago's 150th anniversary. She can be contacted at hoverstreet@luc.edu.

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Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites, edited by Gretchen Buggeln and Barbara Franco, is a guide that belongs in any interpreter's toolkit (figure 1). Part of the American Association for State and Local History's *Interpreting History* series, it addresses a subject that is widespread in American history but often poorly understood: religion. Though there are many museums and historic sites which directly or indirectly deal with religious topics, historians are not always equipped to discuss religion with the public. Nor is the public always informed about religious history. Buggeln and Franco aim to bridge this gap in knowledge by equipping public historians with both practical strategies and generalizable guidelines for good interpretation of religious history.

Interpreting Religion combines thirty case studies of religious sites, historic sites, and museum exhibitions with five essays by the editors to offer readers multiple perspectives on the work of interpreting religion. While each essayist suggests a different combination of interpretive strategies as befits their particular museum or historic site, a few common threads emerge. Throughout the book, the authors stress a visitor-centered approach to

interpretation, emphasize the importance of empathy and humility, and highlight museums and historic sites as places to spark conversation around religious history.

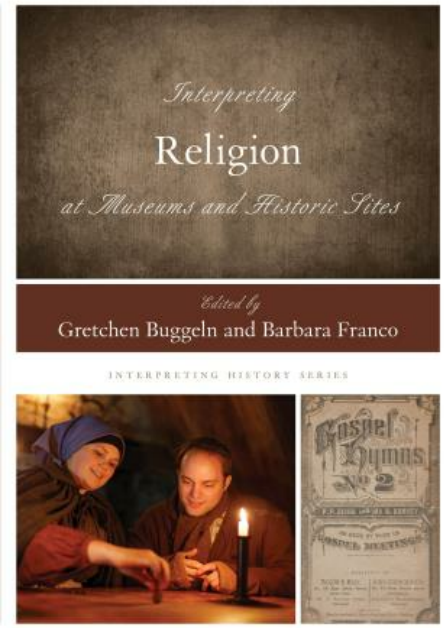

Figure 1: *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

The first chapter presents nine case studies of sites that already have an explicit religious focus or affiliation. Some of these are sacred sites or places of worship, but others are connected to particular historic figures or the founding of religious movements. All of these sites are places where visitors expect to encounter religion. However, such an expectation does not preclude awkward conversations, incorrect assumptions, or difficult questions. Many contributors to this chapter report visitors expecting all interpreters at the site to share the same religious beliefs. Other times, visitors have little or inaccurate prior knowledge (often informed primarily by popular culture) about the religion being discussed. The authors encourage museum workers to think of these situations as opportunities for deeper conversations, not obstacles to teaching history. Finally, this chapter also deals with sites that are still seen and used as sacred spaces, with all the interpretative challenges and tensions that accompany such an arrangement.

Chapter two includes ten case studies of secular historic sites. These sites have no religious affiliation, but they nevertheless have the potential to engage audiences with religious history. They range from historic homes to living history farms and are located across the country, from Hawaii to New York City. Such a variety allows the book to examine several of the most common barriers to interpreting religion at historic sites, including difficulties anticipating and responding to visitor expectations and the public's general discomfort with conversations about religion. Still, the essayists in *Interpreting Religion* present historic sites as places where religion can be discussed as part of everyday life in the United States, arguing that historic sites without an explicit religious focus can be entry points for visitors that might otherwise be uncomfortable talking about religion.

The final chapter of case studies focuses on museum exhibitions. Like historic sites, exhibitions are framed as entry points to religious history, especially because they can connect religious topics to more familiar subjects. This approach both contextualizes historic religious practices and allows interpreters to follow visitors' interests while introducing them to new information. Echoing larger discussions within museum practice, contributors emphasize the need for relationship-building as opposed to dictating facts about theology or religious practice to the public. Instead, interpreters are encouraged to find similarities between their topics and visitors' experiences and interests. For museums that address the diversity of religious experience in American history, as many in this chapter do, finding connections to unfamiliar or uncomfortable subjects is especially crucial. Some visitors have personal connections to the faiths represented in the exhibitions case studies, but not all do, and *Interpreting Religion* provides interpretive strategies to address both.

The book concludes with five essays written or co-written by the editors that tie together the lessons learned from the case studies. Whereas the case studies are practically-focused, summarizing the context of particular institutions and detailing the interpretative strategies implemented, the closing essays take a broader view of the challenges and potential solutions in interpreting religion to the public. In this section, the editors reference some of the relevant theoretical models that underpin the case studies, including work on sacred spaces, material culture, and religion and identity. This brief introduction to the field's existing scholarship, as well as the authors' predictions about the challenges ahead, is what makes the book more than simply a handbook or guide to interpretation.

Interpreting Religion has several purposes, and for the most part, it fulfills them all. It sparks a conversation, suggests a course of action that is both practical and inspiring, and looks to the future of museum interpretation – an ambitious set of goals for a relatively slim volume. No single case study offers a universal prescription for interpreting religious history, but taken together, they provide tools which can be combined to fit any site, secular or overtly religious, large or small, urban or rural. *Interpreting Religion*'s format allows the editors to demonstrate the diversity of religious experience in America's past, argue for the importance of its role in interpreting the past in any setting, and offer a variety of tools to museum professionals wishing to deepen their site's engagement with religious topics.

Perhaps the book's more significant contribution to public history, however, is its convincing argument about the value of American religious history. Talking about religion, the authors claim, reveals a fuller picture of the past for museum visitors. When religious history is ignored or minimized, a significant part of everyday life in America disappears. In the introduction, Buggeln and Franco argue that conversations about religion and history "connect the past and the present" and have the potential to connect people to each other today.[1] Though difficult, good interpretation "invites empathy" for different experiences and identities, past and present.[2] Importantly, *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites* makes it clear that the history of American religion is not solely a history of Protestant Christianity in America, calling public historians to resist stereotypes and oversimplified narratives. The museums and historic sites represented in the case studies, chosen for their innovations in interpreting religious history, nevertheless represent a wide array of diverse religious traditions (figure 2).

Figure 2: William Conner House at Conner Prairie, one of the sites highlighting diversity in America's religious past. Conner Prairie.

Though Buggeln, Franco, and the other authors focus on sites and museums within the United States, their conclusions have broader applications. Like any other country, the United States has a unique relationship with religious history influenced by regional differences, overlapping waves of immigration, and interaction with and among indigenous people and their beliefs. Just as each of the sites described in this book differ, however, countries differ. While they are not explicitly global in scope, the suggestions presented here can be applied to any situations where religious history is contested, unfamiliar, or uncomfortable. Public historians of any nationality will recognize the basics of good interpretation and dialog in the case studies of *Interpreting Religion*.

The saying goes, "Never talk about politics and religion in public." Museums have generally learned how to talk about politics to the public, but for many reasons, religion remains a difficult subject. The solution, the essays in *Interpreting Religion* suggest, may vary from museum to museum, but it does not include avoiding the topic entirely. Instead, the lessons of interpretive theory – listening to the visitor, making connections between the familiar and the unfamiliar, and encouraging empathy – can be applied to religious history as well as political or social history. *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites* is a call to action, but it also provides public historians a solid foundation from which to start.

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Figure 1: *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781442269453/Interpreting-Religion-at-Museums-and-Historic-Sites# (Accessed January 21, 2019).
Figure 2: William Conner House at Conner Prairie, one of the sites highlighting diversity in America's religious past. Conner Prairie. http://www.connerprairie.org/places-to-explore/william-conner-house (Accessed January 21, 2019).

Notes

[1] Gretchen Buggeln and Barbara Franco, eds., *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites*, American Association for State and Local History *Interpreting History* series, (Latham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), xi.
[2] Ibid., 52.

References

Gretchen Buggeln and Barbara Franco, eds. *Interpreting Religion at Museums and Historic Sites*. American Association for State and Local History *Interpreting History* series. Latham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.